

The Woman at the Well

INTERPRETATION OF JOHN 4:1-42

IN RETROSPECT AND PROSPECT



BY

JANETH NORFLEETE DAY

THE WOMAN AT THE WELL

BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION SERIES

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Interpretation of John 4:1-42 in Retrospect and Prospect

BY

JANETH NORFLEETE DAY



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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman, the woman at the well, recorded in John 4:1-42, has long attracted the attention of New Testament scholars. It presents important theological truth, and it leaves the reader with much to reflect upon when the reading is done. Traditional exegesis of the passage has appropriately focused on the revelatory statements of Jesus in this dialogue, but it would be a rare reader who does not reflect as well upon his intriguing dialogue partner, an unnamed Samaritan woman.

The theological focus of traditional scholarly interpretation through the years has highlighted the utterances of Jesus in this text and what they reveal about himself and God the Father. Relatively few interpreters have had anything of substance to say about the Samaritan woman, seeing her primarily as a foil in the drama by means of which Jesus is able to make his significant claims. The majority of scholars who have addressed themselves to the Samaritan woman as anything other than a representative figure for the entire Samaritan people, have described her in pejorative, and often scathing, terms. The characterization of this woman as promiscuous, adulterous, and immoral is based not upon a description of her in the text, but upon a manner of interpreting the conversation that she has with Jesus. This study reviews the traditional interpretations of this text and the factors influencing those interpretations, takes a fresh look at the character of the Samaritan woman in light of the culture of her day, and drawing upon an array of contemporary interpretive methods, offers an alternative proposal for understanding this text and its function in John's Gospel.

AN OVERVIEW OF INTERPRETIVE METHODS

At the end of the twentieth century it became the fashion for scholars to describe their interpretive methods as author-centered, text-centered, or reader-centered. Analogously, they speak of finding the meaning of a text behind the text, within the text, or in front of the text. Each of these approaches has both strengths and weaknesses.

The author-centered approach presupposes that a text is the creation of a single author and that the meaning of the text can be determined by excavating the author's world. In addition to addressing the who, when, where, why, and to whom questions, this method serves as a valuable reminder that the Bible "preserves an authentic historical memory."¹ The interpretive approaches that look for meaning behind the text, collectively called the historical-critical method, enable the reader to understand customs, language, and practices of ancient Near Eastern culture that are essential for interpreting biblical texts. For example, what did it mean in that culture to be slapped on the face, an action that Jesus addresses in Matt. 5:39 in his instructions concerning right behavior? Or how can the interpreter of 1 Cor. 13:8-12 understand Paul's use of *pneumatikoi* for spiritual gifts instead of the more commonly used *charismata* without grammatical and syntactical study?² Such culture-specific information can be derived from the historical-critical methods and greatly enhances our ability to interpret a biblical passage. At the same time, this approach tends to objectify the meaning of the text and negates the possibility for continuing revelation to subsequent readers.

The text-centered approach shifts the locus of meaning to the text, which being autonomous, eliminates the need to consider historical setting or authorial intent. It is valuable for its focus on the final form of the text as a literary creation. It recognizes that "there is an ultimate relationship and interconnectedness between form and content," and that "different genres involve different literary codes and conventions."³ Awareness of the literary techniques of a text allows the reader to appreciate the irony of Paul's statement to the Corinthians in 1 Cor. 4:10 that "we [the apostles] are fools for the sake of Christ, but you are wise in Christ."⁴ It enables the recognition of type scenes and chiasmic patterns, point of view and characterization. In short, it allows the biblical text to communicate as literature and to be studied using literary analyses. However, this method proves inadequate because interpretation of ancient texts

¹ J. Maxwell Miller, "Reading the Bible Historically: The Historian's Approach," in *To Each Its Own Meaning*, ed. Stephen R. Haynes and Steven L. McKenzie (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 16.

² W. Randolph Tate, *Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 27, 20-21.

³ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 70.

requires an understanding of the forms and genres of biblical texts within their ancient rhetorical conventions, categories accessed through historical research.

Reader-centered methods locate meaning somewhere between the text and the reader—in their interaction. They have great potential for showing the significance of biblical texts for contemporary readers while accommodating and utilizing historical and literary methods. They acknowledge that the reading process is “dynamic, open-ended, always subject to modification, change, evaluation, and rereading.”⁵ The practitioners of reader-centered methods recognize that texts have literary gaps that are filled by the reader based on the reader’s knowledge and experience. They recognize that the reader’s understanding of the text will lead to anticipation of certain outcomes, which may or may not be fulfilled. The reader may need to revise expectations as a narrative unfolds.⁶ The reader is inevitably involved in discovering the meaning of a text. The problem with reader-centered methods is that they risk losing control of the meaning delimited by the text itself by allowing too much creativity in interpretation to the reader.

Because of the limitations of each of these approaches, in recent years there has been a small minority of voices calling for an integration of methodologies.⁷ Since each of the three broad categories of method brings difficulties often equal to their value, why not take the best features of each method—picking and choosing eclectical-

⁵ Ibid, 148.

⁶ Ibid, 153-156.

⁷ Vernon K. Robbins, *Exploring the Texture of Texts: A Guide to Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), 1-2: “One of the most notable contributions of socio-rhetorical criticism is to bring literary criticism, social-scientific criticism, rhetorical criticism, postmodern criticism, and theological criticism together into an integrated approach to interpretation. . . . Each method has great strengths, but when interpreters use only one of them, the result is too limited. When an interpreter uses them interactively, a rich and responsible approach is available for dealing with belief, action, and life in the world today.” Cf. Terence J. Keegan, *Interpreting the Bible: A Popular Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985); Frederick C. Tiffany and Sharon H. Ringe, *Biblical Interpretation: A Roadmap* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996); Lorin L. Cranford, “Modern New Testament Interpretation,” in *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Comprehensive Introduction to Interpreting Scripture*, by Bruce Corley, Steve Lemke, and Grant Lovejoy (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1998), 130-131; Francis Watson, “Liberating the Reader: A Theological-Exegetical Study of the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Matt. 25:31-46),” in *The Open Text: New Directions for Biblical Studies*, ed. Francis Watson (London: SCM Press, 1993), 62.

ly from them—to forge a new “method” that brings together their various strengths into a unified scholarly approach? To borrow a biblical allusion from the Gospel of Matthew (13:52), why should not contemporary biblical scholars embrace treasures both old and new? This proposal clearly does not de-value the results of historical-critical study, but rather, seeks to integrate useful insights from those methods with equally useful aspects from literary and reader-oriented methods.

A primary argument for the need to include new methods along with the old is that the interpretation of Scripture is never a static endeavor. To be sure, interpretive traditions are passed along from generation to generation along with the biblical texts, as an examination of commentaries reveals. However, because there is, and always has been, a dynamic interpretive relationship between biblical texts and their surrounding cultures, perceptions of the texts become transformed. Such a transformation of the interpretive perception concerning the biblical text of John 4 is traced in this study.

It is important to note that it is not the biblical text that changes, but the perceptions of the text’s meaning. This transformation of interpretation occurs because, in the words of John Barton:

... it takes two for meaning to be perceived: the text and the interpreter. In every age interpreters ask different questions, and so different aspects of the text’s meaning emerge. The task of interpretation ... is never finished even in principle.⁸

This sort of understanding of the interpretive task leads naturally to an openness to methods other than the historical-critical. Such an openness in no way disparages the judgments and understandings of those scholars of years and generations past who “demonstrated special competence in exegetical work.”⁹ But commentators are often influenced by respected scholars who preceded them to accept certain interpretations that are inconsistent with their own methods. And the modern truism, rightly pervading biblical studies, that no one is able to approach a text without preconceptions, leads contemporary scholars to cast a more discerning eye on some

⁸ “Introduction,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation*, ed. John Barton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1.

⁹ Moises Silva, *Explorations in Exegetical Method: Galatians as a Test Case* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 16.

of the “established” interpretations that we have inherited from well-intentioned scholars of the past.

Even while recognizing the need to re-examine certain “assured results” of earlier interpreters, contemporary scholars must acknowledge that in many cases our own preconceptions are influenced by their commentary. Previous interpretation always, as Dieter Lührmann states, “stands *between* us and the text.”¹⁰ It is this previous interpretation of the Samaritan woman text in John 4 that this study examines and seeks to transcend.

What then is the inherited tradition of interpretation concerning the Samaritan woman? How has she been viewed by the Church and how have artists and writers depicted her? In general, the Samaritan woman has been almost uniformly regarded as a sexually immoral and promiscuous person although she was praised for her role as a witness and evangelist to her people. In the chapters that follow, the trends and patterns of the interpretive history are described, followed by my own contrasting interpretation, which suggests that the Samaritan woman, rather than being immoral and sexually profligate, could have been a pious believer whose suffering Jesus acknowledged and whose faith he rewarded with the revelation of his own identity as the divine emissary for whom she and her people waited.

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

In order to present the interpretive history of the Samaritan woman pericope, three areas of hermeneutical tradition are reviewed: ecclesiastical, artistic, and literary. The approach to each of these areas is uniform. The past two thousand years of tradition are divided into three broad historical periods: The Patristic Period and the Middle Ages (AD 200-1399), the Renaissance and the Reformation (AD 1400-1699), and the Modern Era (1700-The Present). Thus, chapter two traces the ecclesiastical interpretive history by reviewing the exegetical approach of representative scholars from each of these three broad periods. Chapter three takes the same approach to artistic interpretation of the pericope, and chapter four

¹⁰ Dieter Lührmann, *Galatians: A Continental Commentary*, trans. O.C. Dean, Jr. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 5; cited by Silva in *Explorations in Exegetical Method*, 17.

follows the same pattern for literary interpretation. Chapter five presents my own alternative interpretation following a brief description of the contemporary methodologies that converge in my own approach. A final chapter will draw conclusions about the differing results that eventuate from the use of conventional historical-critical methodology and my contemporary, eclectic methodology.

Because my interpretation of the text is dependent upon understanding the Samaritan woman, not as an immoral and profligate character, but as a devout and religious person, the focus of my interpretive review will be the seminal moments in her encounter with Christ that hold potential for revealing her character. Three such defining moments stand out: the woman's initial response to Jesus' request for water, the dialogue concerning her "husband," and her role as witness to her townspeople. Her initial response is important because the perception of that response colors the reader's understanding of her attitude toward Jesus and the tone of her conversation with him. The dialogue about her husband provides the pivotal moment in the reader's assessment of her moral character. The significance of her role as a witness has provided the "positive" depiction of her throughout the course of church history. Consequently, in the review of scholarship, as in the artistic and literary portrayals, these three elements of the narrative are the focus of my analysis.

As for my own method of approaching the text, it is decidedly eclectic: grounded in the traditional historical approach, with respect for the first century setting; cognizant of narrative issues such as plot development, characterization, setting, and so forth; read holistically with a reader-response perspective; sensitive to the feminine gender of Jesus' conversation partner; and influenced by the social location of first century Palestine and Samaria. Thus, methodologically my approach is an amalgam of historical, narrative, reader-response, feminist, and social-scientific methods fused together to form an integrated whole.

CHAPTER TWO

THE SAMARITAN WOMAN AS THE CHURCH INTERPRETED HER

The interpretation of the Bible, from its earliest beginnings, has both influenced theology and been influenced by theology. How the early Church understood the Bible determined to a large extent how the Church formed its theology, that is, how it thought about God and the divine revelation in Scripture. At the same time, the theology that the Church had inherited from Judaism and the Jewish Scriptures influenced how it understood the Christian Scriptures. In time, after the New Testament writings came to be regarded as sacred Scripture, they joined with the Old Testament in directing the thrust of the Church's theology. Thus, biblical interpretation has never taken place in isolation or in a vacuum. It has always been colored to some extent by cultural pre-conceptions or by inherited tradition.

THE PATRISTIC PERIOD AND THE MIDDLE AGES

In the earliest years of the fledgling Church, before the New Testament writings became canon, Jewish interpretation provided the initial hermeneutical approach. Because the aim of Jewish exegetes was to translate Holy Writ into guiding principles for life, making it relevant for everyday living in their own times, they believed that the text contained many meanings.¹ Therefore, Jewish interpreters considered both the literal meaning and any implied meanings that they determined were consistent with the text. From Rabbi Ishmael's school, c. 90-130 C. E., we have the maxim: "Just as the rock is split into many splinters, so also may one biblical verse convey many teachings."² Indeed, Jewish interpretation, which evidenced a variety of methodological approaches, saw the scriptural texts as pregnant with multiple meanings waiting to be searched out. Be-

¹ Richard N. Longnecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 19.

² *Sanhedrin*.34a, trans. Jacob Shachter and H. Freedman, ed. I. Epstein, new ed. (London: Soncino Press, 1969).

cause Christian interpretation grew out of Jewish practice, it, too, was open to a variety of meanings.³

Theology was not the only factor influencing early Christian interpretive practice, however. The philosophical presuppositions and hermeneutical concepts of the surrounding culture also impacted the interpretive paradigms of the early Church. Even the earliest Christian schools reflected in their exegetical practice the secular methods around them.

In Alexandria, the allegorical method flourished. Made prominent by Philo and reflecting the philosophical traditions of its Hellenistic culture, this method approached Scripture as the means to an end. It emphasized making Scripture a guide for the soul on its journey toward holiness. By contrast, in Antioch, which became a rival school in terms of its exegetical method, the emphasis was on textual criticism, philological and historical studies, and the cultivation of classical rhetoric. These values reflected the pattern of the pagan schools of the city.⁴

As an example of the different approaches to interpretation of Scripture, discussions of John 1:27 are revealing. This verse culminates John the Baptist's testimony about Jesus when he is questioned about his baptismal activity by the priests and Levites sent from Jerusalem. In this verse, John attests to Jesus' superiority by stating that he, John, is not worthy even to untie the thongs of Jesus' sandals. For John Chrysostom, representing the Antiochene school, the comment is a straightforward statement concerning John's sense of his role as servant to the Messiah who was of greater honor and superior dignity. In elaborating on the text, Chrysostom makes application by posing the question, "Now, if John was not worthy to loose His sandals John, than whom there was no one greater 'among those born of women'—where shall we rank ourselves?"⁵

³ Rowan A. Greer, "The Christian Bible and Its Interpretation," in James L. Kugel and Rowan A. Greer, *Early Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 128. Among the most common Jewish interpretive methods were literalist, midrashic (interpretive exposition of various forms), peshar (application of biblical prophecies), and allegorical (symbolic.) For a summary of these methods and some of their notable practitioners, see Longnecker, 28-50.

⁴ Karlfried Froelich, ed. and trans, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 20. For a more extended discussion of these two interpretive schools, see David Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now: Contemporary Hermeneutics in the Light of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1992), 75-128.

⁵ John Chrysostom, *Commentary on Saint John the Apostle and Evangelist, Homilies*

Chrysostom saw no hidden meaning in the text, but a spiritual application for subsequent readers. He was concerned that Christians of his own time might understand how the text applied to their lives.

Origen, however, representing the Alexandrian approach, sees far more in the same text. He suggests that the thongs of Jesus' sandals relate to mysteries of the Incarnation, one being "the bond of obscurity," and the other, "the key of knowledge." The "hidden meaning" in the passage about the shoes is, in Origen's view, "that the Incarnation . . . is one of the shoes; and the descent into the house of Hades, whoever Hades is, and the journey into prison with the Spirit is the other."⁶ Origen's commentary, then, proceeds to discuss the hidden significance of Jesus' shoes.

In practice, this hermeneutical antithesis between the two approaches was not absolute. While the Antiochene scholars did react against Alexandria's excessively spiritualistic approach to Scripture, they, too, admitted to a "higher sense" of scriptural texts, leading into spiritual truth. At the same time, the Alexandrians did not deny the historical referent of the Scriptures, but the literal meaning was given "second place to the spiritual teaching intended by the divine author."⁷

While these varied hermeneutical models and rival interpretive centers led to a plurality of questions and sometimes different answers, the early Church Fathers were united in support of scriptural authority and the belief that the Scripture should be interpreted Christologically.⁸ And although the church took over existing traditions of interpretation from Judaism and from secular schools, it used those traditions for its own purposes, primarily to identify Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah and to show that the end times had arrived with him.⁹ In acknowledging the divine author of Scripture, both schools sought deeper meaning and hidden insights of revelation in the sacred text.¹⁰

1-47, trans. Sister Thomas Aquinas Goggin (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1957), 158.

⁶ Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John, Books 1-10*, trans. Ronald E. Heine (Washington, D. C.: Catholic Univ. of America Press, 1989), 217-218.

⁷ Froelich, 21.

⁸ Dockery, 157.

⁹ R. P. C. Hanson, "Biblical Exegesis in the Early Church," in *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, vol. 1: *From the Beginnings to Jerome*, ed. P. R. Ackroyd and C. F. Evans (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1970), 413.

¹⁰ Froelich, 22.

In the West, the Latin Christians, rather than taking sides with either the Alexandrian or Antiochene schools, went their own conservative way. By the middle of the fourth century, the writings of both Antiochan and Alexandrian scholars had been translated into Latin and were being circulated in the West, where Christian exegetes drew eclectically from them.¹¹ Augustine, in his notable work on biblical hermeneutics, *On Christian Doctrine* (396/97; finished in 427), reflected the combined approach of both Eastern schools, stressing both the spiritual goal of building up love of God and neighbor (the Alexandrian approach) and the full use of grammatical, historical and linguistic study in the service of interpretation (the Antiochene approach).¹²

The Patristic Period

Following the resurrection, for the remainder of the first century and for most of the second century, Christian exegesis focused on the Old Testament. Toward the end of the second century, however, the beginnings of Christian exegesis of the New Testament emerged. During the Patristic Period (100-500 C.E.), the allegorical method was the primary means by which Scripture was interpreted. Actually this method flourished initially outside the Church among the gnostic sects, and Christian writers only subsequently adopted it in defense against the heretics.¹³

The early Church's battle against heresy illustrates another principle of biblical interpretation—one that is flourishing anew today, but was apparent in Patristic times as well. It is the principle that a particular interpretation of a text is inevitably influenced by the presuppositions of the interpreter. Tertullian (c. 160-c. 230) expressed this perspective noting that it was pointless to argue with gnostics about the interpretation of Scripture because even though they might agree with Christians upon the canon and upon common exegetical methods, their results would still be dictated by the interpreter's intentions.¹⁴

¹¹ Ibid, 23.

¹² Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. J. F. Shaw, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, First Series, vol. 2, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956).

¹³ Hanson, 416.

¹⁴ Tertullian, *The "Prescription" of Heretics*, in *Tertullian on the Testimony of the Soul*

The earliest commentary on John's Gospel known today was written around 170 C. E. by Heracleon, a Valentinian Gnostic. His work is available only through quotations in Origen's commentary, but there is sufficient material there to understand his interpretation of the Samaritan woman's marital history. Heracleon attributed six previous husbands to the woman, all of whom, in his gnostic perspective, signified "false entanglement with matter."¹⁵ The husband Jesus instructed her to get and bring to him "is her Pleroma in conjunction with which, through the agency of the Saviour, her goal will be achieved."¹⁶

A distinctive feature of Christian exegesis at the end of the second century was the acceptance of John's Gospel by the Church. The gnostic heresy was apparently responsible for some of the Church's earlier hesitancy to accept the Fourth Gospel as fully authoritative because of its widespread use among the gnostic sects.¹⁷ "Justin clearly knows the Gospel [John's], but clearly does not give it equal authority with the others. Tatian and Theophilus of Antioch quote it but do not use it freely or extensively."¹⁸ Irenaeus (fl. ca. 175-ca. 195) was the first among the Fathers to use it and to quote from it extensively, recognizing it as a weapon that could be used against the gnostics rather than as a product of their thought.¹⁹

The first extended commentary on the Gospel of John that deals with the Samaritan woman pericope was that of Origen (ca. 185-ca. 254). The master of allegorizers, he interpreted the Samaritan

and on the "Prescription" of *Heretics*, trans. T. Herbert Bindley (London: SPCK, 1914). See especially Chapters 37-38.

¹⁵ According to Carl M. Moss, "Origen's *Commentary on John*, Book XIII: A Translation with Annotations," (Ph.D. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1982), 39, n. 84, in Gnostic thought all material evil is designated numerologically by the number six. Cf. C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 2nd. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978), 235.

¹⁶ Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John, Books 13-32*, trans. Ronald E. Heine (Washington, D. C.: Catholic Univ. of America Press, 1993), 82.

¹⁷ Gary Burge outlines some of the notable gnostic uses: "A second-century gnostic writing from Egypt, the *Gospel of Truth*, shows extensive Johannine parallels. . . . In fact, the earliest commentaries on John were all gnostic. The charismatic leader Montanus claimed to be the coming Paraclete or Comforter described in John 14-16! Because of this gnostic and Montanist interest, many orthodox leaders were reluctant to promote the Gospel. Some openly opposed its use. But where it was accepted, John was deeply revered." *Interpreting the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), 16.

¹⁸ Hanson, 426.

¹⁹ Ibid.

woman's five husbands as analogous to the five senses. The sixth man, then, was analogous to things perceived by the spirit, but even here there was danger of encountering unsound teaching as the Samaritans had in their false religion. Therefore when Jesus came and revealed the truth to the woman, she denied also the sixth man in favor of Jesus' teaching.²⁰

Specific references to the pericope under study here appear in various writings of the fourth century, primarily in the form of allusions to the Samaritan woman as a model of conversion. Gregory Nazianzen (330-389), sometime Archbishop of Constantinople, in one of his orations says: "Blessed is he from whom Jesus asks drink, as He did from that Samaritan woman, and gives a well of water springing up unto eternal life."²¹ Similarly St. Ambrose (ca. 339-397), Bishop of Milan, in one of his books on the Holy Spirit, urges his readers, "If you seek Jesus, forsake the broken cisterns, for Christ was wont to sit not by a pool but by a well. There that Samaritan woman found Him, she who believed, she who wished to draw water."²² Jerome (ca. 345-ca. 419), on the other hand, alludes to the woman's immorality: "The Samaritan woman in the Gospel, when she declares that her present husband is her sixth, is rebuked by the Lord on the ground that he is not her husband."²³ The use of the verb "rebuked" and the context in which the allusion is used (a discussion about the preference for bigamy or trigamy over prostitution) indicate that Jerome perceived her relationship with the current man as sexual, and therefore immoral.

In the fourth and fifth centuries, commentaries and homilies in both East and West examine the Samaritan woman passage. True to the eastern, or Antiochene practice, John Chrysostom (ca. 344/

²⁰ Origen, *John*, Books 13-32, 80. Moss, 32, n. 58, points out that "in Fragment 57 in the catena, Origen interprets them [the five husbands] as the five books of the law which were all that the Samaritans accepted as divine Scripture."

²¹ "Select Orations of Saint Gregory Nazianzen," trans. Charles Gordon Browne and James Edward Swallow, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, Vol. 7, edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 370.

²² "Three Books of Saint Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, on the Holy Spirit," in *A Select Library of The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Second Series, Vol. 10, trans. H. De Romestin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 114.

²³ "Letter XLVIII: To Pammachius," in *The Principal Works of St. Jerome*, translated by W. H. Fremantle in *A Select Library of The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Second Series, Vol. 6, translated and edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), 215.

354-407) took a direct and literal approach in his interpretation of the text. He saw the woman as committing wicked and disgraceful deeds ("the deed of the woman was acknowledged by all to be wicked") and attempting to conceal them from Christ. Nevertheless, he praised her for not taking offense at Jesus and affirmed her exaltation of mind displayed by her interest in divine knowledge.²⁴ Indeed, he acclaims her as "showing herself much wiser than Nicodemus," and notes that "she exhibited the actions of an Apostle, preaching the Gospel to all, and calling them to Jesus, and drawing a whole city forth to him."²⁵ He further commends her exemplary conduct by contrasting her eagerness to know the Gospel and spiritual truth with the indifference of his contemporaries:

Let us now after this be ashamed, and blush. A woman who had had five husbands, and who was of Samaria, was so eager concerning doctrines, that neither the time of day, nor her having come for another purpose, nor anything else, led her away from inquiring on such matters but we not only do not inquire concerning doctrines, but towards them all our dispositions are careless and indifferent.²⁶

Augustine of Hippo, on the other hand, made full use of the allegorical approach in his interpretation of John 4. He saw the Samaritan woman as "cohabiting with some man in an illicit relationship," but understood her five husbands to be the five senses of the body.

Many have in fact understood . . . the five husbands of this woman to mean the five books of Moses. For the Samaritans made use of these books, and were under the same law But since we are hemmed in by what follows, 'And he whom thou now hast is not thy husband,' it appears to me that we can more easily take the five senses of the body to be the five former husbands of the soul.²⁷

These five senses are licit, given by God, but the woman, while having come to the age of using reason, had not attained wisdom, but had fallen into error—her present adulterous situation. The "true and lawful husband" is the understanding, which with maturity should succeed the limitations of sense perceptions. "This husband

²⁴ Chrysostom, 317-319.

²⁵ John Chrysostom, "Homilies on the Gospel of Saint John," in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, Vol. 14, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 112.

²⁶ Ibid, 114.

²⁷ Augustine, "Lectures or Tractates on the Gospel According to St. John," Series 1, Vol. 7, trans. John Gibb and James Innes, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 104.

had not yet succeeded to those five husbands in that woman. And where he does not succeed, error sways. . . . And this error was not a lawful husband, but a paramour.”²⁸ Therefore, she was to call her “husband,” her understanding, in order that she might comprehend Jesus’ words.²⁹

Augustine’s method of interpretation, as evidenced in his treatment of the Samaritan woman text, was liberally permeated by allegorical symbolism. He did not, however, consider the literal sense of Scripture unimportant or secondary. The Western hermeneutic that eventually emerged and that was identified with the Augustinian tradition emphasized the fourfold sense of Scripture—literal, allegorical, tropological (moral), and anagogical. The standard example of this approach was articulated by John Cassian (d. ca. 433) regarding Jerusalem: in the literal sense, Jerusalem means the city of the Jews; in the allegorical sense, it represents the church; in the tropological sense, it stands for the soul; and in the anagogical sense, it is identified with our heavenly home.³⁰ This example demonstrates the commitment of Western interpreters to expositing the literal sense of the text as foundational, but it also illustrates their penchant for deriving multiple spiritual applications as well.

This ultimately allegorical method in the West, though lending itself to various symbolic interpretations of the Samaritan woman pericope, did not change the Church’s appreciation for the woman. Augustine’s emphasis on the illumination of the woman’s understanding by divine light set the pattern for many subsequent interpretations of her. Regardless of the degree of allegorization in the interpretation, the woman was consistently praised throughout the early Church, in both East and West, for her evangelistic work.³¹

The Middle Ages

This Western hermeneutical method, which was handed on to the Latin Middle Ages, preserved a synthesis of the main strands of

²⁸ Ibid., 104-105.

²⁹ Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, 11-27, trans. John W. Rettig, *The Fathers of the Church*, Vol. 79 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1988), 90-92.

³⁰ John Cassian, *Conferences* XIV.8, in *The Works of John Cassian*, trans. Edgar C. S. Gibson, in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Second Series, vol. 11 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 438.

³¹ Craig S. Farmer, “Changing Images of the Samaritan Woman in Early Reformed Commentaries on John,” *Church History* 65 (1996): 367-368.

Patristic hermeneutics:

The attention to be given to the literal sense preserved the grammatical and historical emphases of the Antiochene school; the allegorical sense expressed the typological understanding of the Old Testament and its rich early Christian tradition; the tropological sense allowed for the interests of Jewish and Christian moralists from the rabbis and Philo to Tertullian and Chrysostom; the anagogical sense kept alive the central concern of Alexandrian exegesis for a spiritual reading of Scriptures.³²

Much of the early biblical interpretation during the Middle Ages (500-1399 C. E.) perpetuated the method of the early Church. Reacting to the social, cultural, and economic upheavals that marked the transition from Patristic times to the Medieval period, the Church clung tenaciously to prevailing scriptural interpretations as a source of stability in the midst of tumultuous circumstances. The text of Scripture and the works of the Fathers, which the Church inherited, provided the needed anchor to maintain some semblance of equilibrium in a chaotic world.

During this period the Church's compelling mission seemed to be the preservation and transmission of the Scriptures. Such a mission demanded fidelity to the sacred tradition it had inherited, and pre-Scholastic biblical exegesis was characterized by "reverence for the antiquity and authority of the writings of the Greek and Latin Fathers of the Church."³³ Cassiodorus (ca. 487–ca. 580) perhaps best summed up the Medieval attitude toward the Fathers and antiquity in his *Introduction to Divine and Human Readings*:

Let us follow with pious zeal the paths of knowledge discovered by the labor of the Fathers. . . . Let us consider as divine beyond doubt that which is found to be said rationally in the most excellent commentators; if anything happens to be found out of harmony and inconsistent with the rules of the Fathers, let us decide that it should be avoided.³⁴

Not only did Medieval exegesis reproduce and imitate the Fathers, it also appropriated their method. While there was an occasional commentator who emphasized the literal and historical sense of Scripture without overlaying it with allegory, as the Antiochene

³² Froelich, 28-29.

³³ Robert E. McNally, *The Bible in the Early Middle Ages* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 11.

³⁴ Cassiodorus Senator, *An Introduction to Divine and Human Readings*, trans. Leslie Webber Jones (New York: Octagon Books, 1966), 123-24.

school had,³⁵ the dominant and characteristic method drew upon the Alexandrian model and expounded the four types of meaning that the Middle Ages inherited from the time of Augustine and John Cassian.³⁶ By the later Middle Ages, however, particularly with the work of Thomas Aquinas, there came a renewed focus on the literal sense of Scripture. Not that Aquinas ignored the allegorical; he clearly provided for the multiple senses of scriptural interpretation, but held that the literal sense is the basis for the other senses.³⁷

Eventually Medieval commentators of the West tended to base their treatments of the Samaritan woman upon a synthesis of the exegetical work of the Patristic commentators, primarily Chrysostom (East) and Augustine (West). Following Chrysostom, they regarded favorably her response to Jesus, finding her words sincere and respectful, with no indication of irritation or sarcasm. Along with Augustine, they emphasized the idea of divine illumination, interpreting the woman's marital history as symbolic of the carnal soul's spiritual progress toward spiritual understanding. In general, Medieval exegesis portrayed the Samaritan woman as slow of understanding, but sincere, and thus gradually able to be brought to enlightenment.³⁸

Continuing in the tradition of Augustine, most Medieval commentators connected Jesus' request for the woman to call her husband with her failure to understand the spiritual nature of his words. They understood his request "allegorically as an exhortation to apply her intellect or reason to his words."³⁹ Thomas Aquinas, with his emphasis on the literal sense of Scripture as necessary to understanding the other senses, acknowledges this Augustinian interpretation, but additionally includes Chrysostom's approach. Along with Chrysostom he suggests that Jesus wanted to open the husband's understanding also so that he could instruct his wife at home in keeping with the scriptural admonitions of 1 Cor. 11:3: "Man is the head of

³⁵ Perhaps the notable example was Alexander of St. Victor, according to Beryl Smalley in *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1964), 112ff. Cf. G. R. Evans, *The Language and Logic of the Bible: The Earlier Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 8.

³⁶ Robert M. Grant with David Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, 2nd ed. (n.p.: Fortress Press, 1989), 85.

³⁷ Ibid., 89.

³⁸ Farmer, 368.

³⁹ Ibid.

the woman," and 1 Cor. 14:35: "If the wife wishes to learn anything, let her ask her husband at home."⁴⁰

Again the Medieval commentators are uniformly persuaded that ultimately Jesus spoke of the woman's husband in order to convince her that he, Jesus, was no ordinary man. By revealing his supernatural knowledge of her life circumstances, he intended to show her his divine nature. Her journey to spiritual illumination progresses as she perceives Jesus to be a prophet and asks him her most pressing religious question. The question about the proper place of worship is not a diversionary tactic on her part, but a commendable action, especially surprising in a woman. According to Aquinas, we should

admire the woman's diligence and attention: for women are considered curious and unproductive, and not only unproductive, but also lovers of ease (1 Tim 5), whereas she [the Samaritan woman] did not ask Christ about worldly affairs, or about the future, but about the things of God, in keeping with the advice, "Seek first the kingdom of God" (Matt 6:33).⁴¹

In addition to functioning as a model of the sinner's illumination of faith for the Medieval commentators, the Samaritan woman was also commended as a paradigm of the faithful witness to the gospel. Aquinas credits her with "taking on the role of an apostle" and compares her to the male apostles, pointing out that she left her work (her water jar) to proclaim the good news just as the apostles left their work (their fishing nets) when called to follow Christ.⁴²

One notable event of the Middle Ages that sheds light on how positively the Samaritan woman was perceived by the Eastern Church was the bestowal of sainthood upon her. In the Eastern Orthodox tradition she was given a special name, Photeine, which means "bright," "shining," "radiant." Christ himself was said to have given her this name.⁴³ As a significant figure in the Johannine community and a faithful witness to Jesus, she was honored as an apos-

⁴⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of Saint John*, part 1, trans. by James A. Weisheipl and Fabian R. Larcher (Albany, N.Y.: Magi Books, 1980), 243.

⁴¹ Ibid., 245.

⁴² Ibid., 253-254.

⁴³ Eva Catafygiotu Topping, *Saints and Sisterhood: The Lives of Forty-Eight Holy Women* (Minneapolis: Light and Life Pub. Co., 1990), 134. According to Topping, the Orthodox Church celebrates her as the "Glorious Saint and Great-Martyr Photeine" on February 26, and as the "Samaritan Woman" on the fourth Sunday after Easter. The Roman Church honors her on March 20.

tle. In Greek sermons from the fourth to the fourteenth centuries, she is referred to as both apostle and evangelist, in comparison with whom the male apostles and disciples are found to be less effective.⁴⁴

Later, Byzantine hagiographers developed her story, claiming that she received baptism at Pentecost along with her five sisters and her two sons. She then began a career as an itinerant missionary, traveling far and wide to proclaim the gospel. From Carthage, when Nero began his persecution of the Christians in Rome, Photine, along with her family and many African Christians, journeyed to Rome in response to a dream in which Jesus appeared to her. In Rome, she confronted Nero, who tried unsuccessfully by various means to torture and kill her and those with her. During the course of these experiences, Photine is said to have converted and catechized the daughter of Nero and her hundred slave girls. Eventually Nero had all her entourage except Photine beheaded, but she remained imprisoned where she turned her prison into a "house of God", converting many Romans. Grieved that she had been refused the crown of martyrdom along with her sisters and her sons, she prayed for release from this life and was soon allowed to surrender her soul.⁴⁵

For many generations, Orthodox Christians have addressed the following prayer to Saint Photine, considered blessed and exalted by the Messiah on account of his conversation with her at the well of Samaria:

Illuminated by the Holy Spirit, All-Glorious One,
from Christ the Savior you drank the water of salvation.
With open hand you give it to those who thirst.
Great-Martyr Photine, Equal-to-the-Apostles,
pray to Christ for the salvation of our souls.⁴⁶

Regardless of how our theology regards sainthood, the veneration of the Medieval Church, both East and West, shows that traditionally the Samaritan woman was held in high regard. In the East, greater interest was attached to her character and personality because of its focus on her response to Christ. In the West, the influence of Augustine's allegorical interpretation directed more attention to her as a symbol for Gentile conversion. In both traditions, however, prior to the Reformation, the Church emphasized her role as a sincere respondent to the Gospel and a faithful witness.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 138.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 140-141.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 141.

THE RENAISSANCE AND THE REFORMATION

The Reformation (1500-1700) brought about an altered emphasis in biblical interpretation. The Reformers did not discredit the interpretations of the early Fathers, but they came to regard them as "fellow-readers," who though closer to the source, were limited and fallible just like themselves or other readers. What they did reject was the notion that Church tradition had equal authority with Scripture in leading people to salvation.⁴⁷ Rather than viewing the Bible as a sort of law book, "interpreted by judicial decisions which possess binding force", the spirit of the Reformers insisted that the Bible is "a book of life through which God speaks directly to the human soul".⁴⁸ Naturally, then, they insisted upon a literal, historical, and grammatical understanding of the Bible, but a literal understanding guided by the Spirit of God. By this means, the religious value of Scripture could be discerned and taught.⁴⁹

For Martin Luther, the historical understanding of the text was primary, but it was not an end in itself. It was a means to help in understanding Christ. Luther did not deny the existence of allegories in Scripture, but held that they are only to be found where the authors intentionally wrote them. The primary value for Luther in all biblical interpretation was to find the "spiritual interpretation", that is, its Christocentric meaning. This spiritual interpretation is based on literal and historical exegesis, but it is the Holy Spirit that brings illumination.⁵⁰ Consequently, in his sermons on the Gospel of John, Luther's treatment of the Samaritan woman pericope uses the literal, historical meaning as a spotlight to illuminate the message of Scripture for Christians of his own day. In seeking the contemporary application of the biblical text, Luther returned to the ancient Jewish approach to interpreting Scripture.

Luther first examines the initial encounter between Jesus and the woman. His spiritual interpretation dominates his commentary, focusing on the implications of Jesus being hungry and thirsty, but in the midst of this discussion, he says of the Samaritan woman:

⁴⁷ G. R. Evans, *The Language and Logic of the Bible: The Road to Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985), 21-27.

⁴⁸ Grant and Tracy, 92.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 93.

⁵⁰ Kemper Fullerton, "Luther's Doctrine and Criticism of Scripture," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 63 (1906): 14-16.

“Apparently she was not a bad woman. Still she is reluctant to give Him water.”⁵¹ Capitalizing on the duty of Christians to respond to the hunger and thirst of the poor around them, because thus they minister to Christ himself, Luther goes on to uphold the Samaritan woman as a model:

But the Christians who really recognize the mercy of Christ the Lord are ready to share their food and drink as the good Samaritan woman did. At first, to be sure, she appeared obdurate; but when Christ preached so eloquently, she was converted, together with the whole city.⁵²

It is notable that Luther used the adjective “good” to describe the Samaritan woman. In context, this value judgment is made in reference to her response to Christ’s preaching, but clearly, he portrays her in a positive light. Luther makes no reference at all in his sermon to Jesus’ request concerning her husband. In reference to her question about Mount Gerizim, Luther says that “she is, of course, caught in the web of error and is not a true believer,”⁵³ but the context indicates that this remark concerns her religious faith, not her moral life.

It is impossible to know how Luther regarded the morality of the Samaritan woman since he fails to address that portion of the interchange in his writings. However, the few brief allusions that he does make to the woman affirm her as a model of a receptive convert and faithful witness, continuing the positive interpretive tradition of the Church Fathers. Luther, then, did not alter the received tradition concerning the Samaritan woman.

With the development of subsequent Reformation theology, however, we find that a radical change took place in the attitude of Protestant commentators toward the Samaritan woman. The picture of her as “a sweet and courteous soul who allows herself to be led to spiritual illumination” was swept away in the winds of Calvinistic theology.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Martin Luther, “Sermons on the Gospel of St. John, Chapters 1-4,” in *Works*, Vol. 22, edited by Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1957), 517.

⁵² *Ibid*, 521.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 525.

⁵⁴ Farmer, 370. Some scholars would argue that Calvin’s interpretation of the Samaritan woman reflects more on his view of women than his view of Scripture. His description of the Samaritan woman is consistent with his derogatory commentary concerning the women at the tomb. Calvin considered Jesus’ commission of the women to tell the disciples of his resurrection as a reproach to the

From the outset, Reformed commentators depict the Samaritan woman as antagonistic to Jesus, and they understand all her comments as being delivered with an impertinent, saucy, challenging attitude. Calvin portrays her questioning response to Jesus' request for water—how it can be that a Jew would ask water of a Samaritan—as a reproachful retaliation for the contempt with which Jews customarily treat Samaritans. He understands the woman to be jeering at Jesus as if to say, “Oh! You’re sure it’s all right to ask me for a drink, when you think we are so irreligious?”⁵⁵

In a similar tone, Wolfgang Musculus, another sixteenth-century Reformed commentator, accuses her of being forgetful of her sinful condition so that she speaks “with womanly temerity” (*muliebri temeritate*), initiating a dispute about Jewish-Samaritan relations. He argues that she ought to have said, “how is it that you . . . request a drink from me, a vile prostitute (*vile scortum*) not worthy of being addressed.”⁵⁶

Although Calvin expressed no moral judgment of the woman in his earliest characterization of her as sassy and hostile, he wastes little time in getting to that judgment. Indeed, in commenting on Jesus' answer to her, he praises Christ for taking the opportunity “to preach about the grace and power of His Spirit, and that to a hussy who did not deserve Him to speak to her at all. . . . For what was there in this unhappy woman, that suddenly from a prostitute she became a disciple of the Son of God?”⁵⁷

When Jesus begins to speak about “living water,” most of the Reformed commentators perpetuate the traditional interpretation that the woman's thinking is limited to the idea of physical water, but

disciples. Because the disciples “had been so slow and sluggish to believe . . . they deserve to have as their teachers, not only women, but even oxen and asses. . . . Yet it pleased the Lord to show a proof of his power in those contemptible and weak instruments.” John Calvin, *The Gospel According to St. John 11-21*, trans. by T. H. L. Parker. Ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 199-200. However, some recent studies challenge the assertion that because Calvin viewed women as having an inferior place in the created order, he took a misogynist attitude toward them in his exegesis. See Jane Dempsey Douglass, *Women, Freedom, and Calvin* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), esp. 34-35, for detailed discussion of this issue.

⁵⁵ John Calvin, *The Gospel According to St. John 1-10*, trans. by T. H. L. Parker. Ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 90.

⁵⁶ Wolfgang Musculus, *Commentariorum in evangelistam Ioannem, Heptas prima* (Basel, 1545), microfiche, 115.

⁵⁷ Calvin, *I-10*, 90.

they perceive her attitude quite differently than the Patristic and Medieval commentators did. While earlier commentators characterized her wonderment over how Jesus will provide this water as naive and confused, the Reformed commentators "hear a caustic and flippant tone in the Samaritan woman's conversation."⁵⁸ Musculus says that she accuses Jesus of absurdities, while Oecolampadius regards her response as ridiculing Jesus' naivete.⁵⁹ Calvin portrays her response as contemptuous: "... this woman at first not only despises Christ, but even jeers at Him. . . . the woman knows perfectly well that Christ is speaking of spiritual water; but because she despises Him, she cares nothing for His promises."⁶⁰

In the discussion concerning her five husbands, Calvin's judgment could not be any harsher:

[Christ] openly accuses her of wickedness. I do not think He is referring to one act of adultery, for when He says that she has had five husbands, we may suppose it happened because she drove her husbands to divorce her with her wanton and stubborn ways. I interpret the words like this: Though God joined you to lawful husbands, you never stopped sinning, and at last your divorces cost you your reputation and you gave yourself up to prostitution.⁶¹

In Calvin's interpretation, this rebuke by Jesus finally brings the woman to submission for now she acknowledges her sinfulness and eagerly desires to hear Christ's teaching. Indeed, the Reformed commentators interpret her acknowledgment of Jesus as a prophet to be admission of her sin. They insist, however, that she has not yet *felt* her sins.⁶²

The Reformers vary in interpreting the woman's question about the proper place for worshiping God. According to Oecolampadius and Bullinger, this question represents her sense of panic concerning her sin and she hopes to atone for it by claiming the religious practices of her Samaritan people.⁶³ Musculus, on the other hand, sees her raising the question to deflect the conversation to

⁵⁸ Farmer, 371.

⁵⁹ Musculus, 116; Oecolampadius, *Annotationes pie ac doctae in Evangelium Iohannis* (Basel, 1533), microfiche, fol. 75r.

⁶⁰ Calvin, 1-10, 92, 93.

⁶¹ Ibid, 94.

⁶² Oecolampadius, fol. 79r-79v; Heinrich Bullinger, *In Divinum Iesu Christi Domini nostri Evangelium secundum Ioannem, Commentariorum libri X* (Tigvri, 1543), microfiche, fol. 54v; Musculus, 122; Calvin, 94.

⁶³ Oecolampadius, fol. 78v-79r; Bullinger, fol. 52v.

another subject.⁶⁴ Calvin, by contrast, refutes these ideas and commends her religious zeal: "Some have the mistaken idea that the woman finds the rebukes disagreeable and hateful and cunningly changes the conversation. On the contrary . . . having been informed about her sin [she] wants to be taught generally about the pure worship of God."⁶⁵

From this point on in Calvin's commentary, the woman is more kindly treated. Having been overcome by Jesus' compassion, she now teaches by her example. When she asks Jesus the question about the proper place of worship, Calvin credits her with acting "properly and regularly in consulting a prophet lest she should make mistakes in worshipping God."⁶⁶ He further approves her for leaving her waterpot in her haste to return to the city to witness to her fellow Samaritans. Interestingly, in this final approbation, Calvin manages to combine approval for her witness with further elaboration of the woman's sinfulness:

Why does she lie and say that Christ told her *all things*? I have already pointed out that Christ did not reprove her for her fornication alone, but put before her in a few words the many sins in her life. The Evangelist has not recorded every sentence in detail, but only states in summary that, to curb the woman's banter, Christ laid bare her past and present life. Yet we see that in her godly enthusiasm, she does not at all spare herself or her reputation to magnify the name of Christ, for she does not hesitate to relate her infamy.⁶⁷

According to Farmer, the explanation for this "sea change" in the attitude of commentators toward the Samaritan woman can be traced to Reformed theology. He points out that commentators throughout the church's history—Patristic, Medieval, and Reformation—were in essential agreement in viewing the Samaritan woman as a model for the conversion of a pagan to Christianity. However, when it comes to the question of her character, the dominant Reformed perspective describes her "in rather unflattering terms, as a hussy who ridicules Jesus."⁶⁸ He suggests that the fundamental reason for this change in exegetical perspective can be traced to the Reformed emphasis on election.⁶⁹

⁶⁴ Musculus, 122-123.

⁶⁵ Calvin, *I-10*, 95.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 104.

⁶⁸ Farmer, 374.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 375.

Farmer concedes that this new exegetical portrait can be partly explained by the Reformer's belief that self-understanding is essential before a person can experience divine grace. They interpret the Samaritan woman's initial conversation as brash and challenging because she had not yet recognized her sinful condition and thus she is unaware of her need for Jesus' gracious forgiveness. Nevertheless, Farmer believes that the driving force behind their interpretations is tied in to Calvinist doctrine: "The Samaritan woman has been elected to salvation not on the basis of her pleasing disposition, not on the basis of her meritorious response to Jesus, but solely on the basis of God's goodness and mercy."⁷⁰

The Medieval commentators, represented by Thomas Aquinas, presented the woman as cooperating with Jesus in the process of her illumination to divine truth. Indeed, Aquinas goes so far as to argue that her cooperation was necessary for her to obtain grace: ". . . grace is not given to anyone without their asking and desiring it. . . . In the justification of the sinner, an act of free will is necessary to detest sin and to desire grace."⁷¹ Luther, by contrast, because of his own experience, was captivated by the scriptural warrant of salvation by grace through faith and not as the result of any individual merit. According to the subsequent Reformed commentators, influenced by Calvin, Jesus overwhelms her resistance with his grace, thereby demonstrating the unconditional and irresistible quality of God's grace.⁷² Assuming that Farmer's assessment is valid, the Reformed commentators present a classic manifestation of the way in which biblical interpretation is influenced and affected by theological currents of the time. Luther was profoundly influenced by his discovery of the efficacy of God's grace as the sole means of justification, and the Protestant Reformers were concerned to counter any notion of "works righteousness" such as the Catholic Church affirmed with the evidence of God's unconditional grace.

THE MODERN ERA

While the Renaissance and Reformation brought a new sophistication to biblical interpretation, the emergence of the historical-crit-

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Aquinas, *Commentary on John*, 239.

⁷² Farmer, 375.

ical method during the seventeenth century marked the real watershed in biblical hermeneutics. Most commentators of the "modern" period characteristically followed this method until the latter decades of the twentieth century when literary and ideologically directed methods began to influence another new era in biblical interpretation.

Traditional/ Historical-Critical Interpretations

Some of the kindest treatments of the Samaritan woman in traditional exegesis come from B. F. Westcott, writing in the late nineteenth century, and C. K. Barrett and Robert Kysar, writing in the mid- and late twentieth century. Westcott understands her initial reaction to Jesus' request for a drink as wonder that he would cross the ethnic and social barriers between them. He perceives no hostility or churlishness in her response. Concerning her marital status he reports that while facilities for divorce were fewer among the Samaritans than among the Jews, there is no reason to surmise that the woman's marriages were illegally dissolved.⁷³ Even her present situation of living with a man without the legal sanction of marriage, although it was dishonorable, was not expressly forbidden by Mosaic law.⁷⁴ While Westcott makes no direct commendation of her for her witness, he does speak approvingly of her setting aside her task of drawing water to carry out the more significant action of

⁷³ "The modern hermeneutical tradition almost uniformly assumes the woman has been divorced five times, although the biblical text gives no explanation for her remarkable marital history. The possibility that she has been widowed multiple times rarely occurs in the interpretive history. Cf. E. F. Harrison, "The Son of God Among the Sons of Men," in *Bibliotheca Sacra* 103 (1946): 182: "The woman had been married five times. But the sequel gives us a hint that some of these husbands may not have died. Rather, this woman had a record of divorce which made her present relationship of sinful character an easy one into which to fall." However, he gives no explanation as to "the sequel" that hints at any irregularity, nor the basis on which he asserts her "record of divorce." Robert Kysar, *John* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), is one of the few exceptions to this assumption, as noted in the following pages.

⁷⁴ William Temple, *Readings in St. John's Gospel* (London: Macmillan, 1959) 62, likewise states that the woman was probably within the requirements of the Mosaic law, but had taken liberal advantage of its exemptions from the divine law. Cf. George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, WBC Vol. 36 (Waco: Word Books, 1987), 61: "Technically it was not contrary to the Mosaic law for a woman to be married five times, but Jewish teachers forbade a woman to be married more than twice or at most (in the eyes of some) three times; this woman must have had a series of divorces and now lived with a man without marriage."

witnessing to all the inhabitants of her city, not just to her “husband.”⁷⁵

Barrett’s only commentary concerning the woman’s initial interaction with Jesus is to note her misunderstanding of his spiritual intent. Both Jews and Samaritans understood “living water” in a literal sense as fresh, flowing water. Therefore it was not surprising that the woman understood his reference in this way. On the matter of her marital status, however, Barrett offers two possibilities: (1) “the woman had had five legal husbands who had died or divorced her, and that she was now living with a man to whom she was not legally married”; or (2) the man with whom the woman was presently living was “legally her husband according to Mosaic law, but not according to Christian standards (Mark 10:11ff and parallels).”⁷⁶ He notes that while any number of marriages was legally admissible, the Rabbis did not approve of more than three.⁷⁷ He goes on to propose that it is possible, and perhaps correct, to regard Jesus’ words not as criticism but as a simple statement of fact indicating his supernatural knowledge, a view supported by v. 29 where the woman reports that he told her all she had ever done.⁷⁸

Robert Kysar records the woman’s initial response to Jesus’ overture as amazement that he is violating established custom by talking with a woman, and at that, a Samaritan.⁷⁹ Concerning the woman’s marital status, Kysar’s position is that Jesus does not intend to embarrass or accuse the woman; that “her sin (if it is such, and that is not entirely clear) is not the central feature of the conversation.” He goes on to assert that it is not necessary to interpret the woman’s situation as sinful, “since we are not told of the occa-

⁷⁵ B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 68ff.

⁷⁶ Barrett, 235.

⁷⁷ Numerous commentators make mention of the Jewish sanction against more than three marriages, but as Pheme Perkins, *The Gospel According to St. John: A Theological Commentary* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1988), 55, points out, “The Samaritan legal situation is unknown (Jewish law permitted three wives); so it is difficult to tell whether Jesus’ description of the woman’s husbands implies condemnation or is a demonstration that he has unusual knowledge of the woman’s personal life.”

⁷⁸ C. K. Barrett, 235. Cf. J. H. Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, Vol 1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1962), 142-43, who refers to the woman’s “sad condition” and guilty conscience, but emphasizes that the evangelist’s stress is on Jesus’ power to know beyond natural insight.

⁷⁹ Robert Kysar, *John* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), 63.

sions for her numerous remarriages [i.e., perhaps each had died, and she had remarried legally]."⁸⁰ He considers her witness to be "a delightful bit of enthusiastic exaggeration" because she reports to the townspeople that he told her all she had ever done. He does grant, however, that her witness is effective in bringing the Samaritans to believe.⁸¹

An interesting variation on this approach can be found in the commentary of Frederic Godet. He describes the woman's initial response as surprise and suggests that the reason for Jesus' request that she call her husband was that "Jesus did not wish to act upon a dependent person without the participation of the one to whom she was bound, and the more because the summoning of the latter might be the means of extending His work."⁸² While he finds some support in the pericope's syntax for concluding that the woman had lived in adultery, he concedes that, "It is not absolutely necessary, however, to press so far the meaning of this construction."⁸³ He then applauds her role as "messenger, and, as it were, a missionary of Jesus . . . [to] her husband and those whom she will find."⁸⁴

E. C. Hoskyns, on the other hand, expresses an interpretation that is typical of a number of modern commentators. He interprets the woman's initial response as surprise, but holds that she finds Jesus' claim as the giver of living water to be "ridiculous and blasphemous."⁸⁵ He had no vessel with which to obtain water and it was absurd to think that he could be a greater person than Jacob, who had made this well water available. Hoskyns, and those who share his interpretation, perceive the woman as an adulteress, needing her sin to be exposed, but they focus more upon the woman's husbands as an allusion to five foreign deities that had been introduced into Samaria by heathen peoples (2 Kings 17:24, 28-30; Josephus, *Ant.* ix. 288-91). According to this allegorical interpretation, the woman is a symbol for Samaria, which had been inhabited by five foreign tribes each with its own god. Thus, the one who is not a hus-

⁸⁰ Ibid, 65.

⁸¹ Ibid, 68, 70.

⁸² Frederic Louis Godet, *Commentary on John's Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1978), 425.

⁸³ Ibid, 426. "The emphatic position of the pronoun σου before ἀξίηται implies, perhaps, the following understood antithesis: 'Not thine own, but the husband of another'." (v. 13).

⁸⁴ Ibid, 433.

⁸⁵ Edwyn Clement Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel*, ed. Francis Noel Davcy (London: Faber and Faber, 1947), 242.

band represents either a false god adopted from the foreign tribes or the Samaritans' mistaken worship of the true God. The exposure of the woman's sin exposes the sin of her people, and of the world.⁸⁶ Among the difficulties with this interpretation is that 2 Kings 17, upon which it is based, indicates that the Samaritans had seven gods rather than the five attributed to them in this allegorical interpretation.

Another contemporary view takes the Samaritan woman not as an allegorical figure but as a representative one. According to this notion, she represents the entire Samaritan people, and through the vehicle of Jesus' conversation with her Jesus can raise the critical issues of the false Samaritan religion and proclaim his universal messiahship. John Marsh, one prominent advocate of this interpretation, makes the additional suggestion that it is particularly appropriate to this view that the Samaritan representative is a woman.

With any Samaritan John could have raised quite easily the questions that are bound to arise as the Hope of Israel meets a representative of this 'third race', which is neither truly Jewish nor wholly Gentile; but the fact that the representative happens to be a woman facilitates the dialogue at one important (and to some commentators inscrutable) point, for Jesus can ask her, who represents Samaria . . . , to fetch her husband—or, in figurative language . . . , to fetch, to declare her gods.⁸⁷

Not many modern scholars treat the Samaritan woman as harshly as Calvin did, even though they are convinced of her immorality.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Hoskyns, 242-43. Cf. Barrett, 235; Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to John*, Vol. 1 (London and New York: Burns & Oates and Herder and Herder, 1968), 433; Ernst Haenchen, *John I: A Commentary on the Gospel of John Chapters 1-6*, trans. by Robert W. Funk, ed. by Robert W. Funk with Ulrich Busse (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 221; D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 232-233; Peter F. Ellis, *The Genius of John* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1985), 70; Birger Olsson, *Structure and Meaning in the Fourth Gospel* (Lund, Sweden: CWK Gleerup, 1974), 186; Justine Kahungu Mbwiti, "Jesus and the Samaritan Woman, John 4:1-42," in *Talitha, qumi*, ed. Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Mosimbi Kanyoro (Ibadan: Daystar Press, 1990), 71.

⁸⁷ John Marsh, *John* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968), 209.

⁸⁸ A number of commentators are explicit in attributing an immoral character to the woman based on filling the gaps in the story with what they perceive as the obvious implications of the interchange. A. M. Hunter, *The Gospel According to John* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 48, stipulates that "her present husband is not really her husband but her lover, and her previous number of husbands is no credit to her." Jesus' "exposure of her sin" reveals him as "a seer able to unveil the guilty secrets of her past." Carson, 221, speaks of Jesus' knowledge of "the man with whom she is now sleeping," and John Sanford, *Mystical Christianity: A Psychological Commentary on the Gospel of John* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 114,

Raymond Brown, in his monumental commentary, affirms the coquettish stylization of the Samaritan woman, agreeing with Lagrange's characterization of her conversation as "mincing and coy."⁸⁹ Consistent with Augustine and Aquinas, his Catholic forebears, Brown considers the woman herself as unimportant. Her primary function is to be a foil for Jesus' revelation. However, he differs from Aquinas and many Medieval commentators in that he considers her capable of understanding Jesus' spiritual intent in the conversation, "presenting himself and his doctrine as the replacement of the Torah in which the Samaritans believed."⁹⁰

Brown describes her as mocking Jesus for his failure to observe propriety in her reply to his initial request for water, although he credits her with being intrigued as she begins to realize that Jesus is speaking of more than physical water.⁹¹ He goes on, however, to accuse her of giving "an ambiguous and even deceptive answer" in reaction to what he describes as Jesus' "moral probing." Jesus then uses her answer "to uncover her evil deeds."⁹²

Brown follows this line of thinking further, interpreting her question about the proper place of worship as an attempt to divert Jesus' attention from her personal life, even as he allows that she is beginning "to think on a spiritual or heavenly level."⁹³ As for the woman's role as a witness, Brown simply makes the passing comment

refers to "her five husbands and present lover who is not her husband."

⁸⁹ R. E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII*, Anchor Bible 29 (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966), 175, referring to M.-J. Lagrange, *Evangelie selon Saint Jean*, 8th ed. (Paris: Gabalda, 1948), 101.

⁹⁰ Brown, *Gospel*, 176.

⁹¹ Several commentators understand the woman's question as to whether Jesus is greater than Jacob, who gave the well, as an expression of arrogance or disdain. Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 262, 264, suggests her attitude was "a sense of outrage;" he also posits that until Jesus instructed her to call her husband, she was not taking the conversation seriously, that she was humoring the stranger whom she thought of "as a little mad."

⁹² Brown, *Gospel*, 177.

⁹³ Ibid. Hermann N. Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, ET 1997), 159, disagrees with Brown's position that Jesus uses this interchange (vss. 17b, 18) to "unmask her sinful life further." He questions "whether the text permits a psychological-pastoral interpretation ending with a deepening of the woman's sense of sin and her self-knowledge that Jesus is presumably now imparting. . . . That she does not immediately reveal her entire situation to him can hardly be interpreted against her." And when Jesus "proceeds to confront her with a picture of her life, she does not act like this were the first time she realized the seriousness of it or finally arrived at self-knowledge and a sense of sin. At least she shows no sign of this."

that it is because of her words that her townspeople believe. He contrasts them and their ready belief with the Jews of chapter two (v. 23-25) who come to only “an unsatisfactory faith . . . based on a superficial admiration of miracles.” He gives no individual commendation to the Samaritan woman for her role in proclaiming the gospel and leading many to Christ, pointing beyond her testimony to the “greater durability” of the Samaritan “harvest” based on “Jesus’ own word that he is the Savior of the world.”⁹⁴

While Brown has little to say about the woman’s witnessing role in his commentary, he makes a strong argument for her “quasi-apostolic role” in an appendix to his monograph, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*. He points out that the writer of John’s Gospel describes her as bearing witness to Jesus “and thus bringing people to believe in him on the strength of [her] word.” Here he affirms that the Samaritan woman has “a real missionary function” as evidenced by Jesus’ dialogue with his male disciples. The harvest of the Samaritans verifies Jesus’ teaching in v. 37 that “one sows, while another reaps” for “the woman has sown the seed and thus prepared for the apostolic harvest.”⁹⁵

A significant number of twentieth-century commentators view the Samaritan woman in a manner similar to the interpretation given by Rudolf Schnackenburg.⁹⁶ Like most modern interpreters, he understands the woman to be astonished by Jesus’ request for water. When she questions Jesus’ relationship to “our father Jacob” who gave the well (4:12), Schnackenburg considers the possibility that her remark might be mocking and might suggest “suspicion of the greatness of Jesus.”⁹⁷ Concerning the request that she call her husband, he considers it to be prompted by Jesus’ efforts to reveal his supernatural knowledge. Jesus is not so much attempting to confront the woman with her sin as to convince her to believe in him. Her sinful situation will be resolved if she comes to proper belief in Jesus

⁹⁴ Ibid, 184-85.

⁹⁵ Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 187-189. R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 137, also grants the woman’s apostolic role: “As nearly as possible in the narrative context she is given an apostolic role: she calls others as Jesus called the disciples . . . and others believe “because of her word.” She is “a model of the female disciple and possibly a model of Samaritan believers also.”

⁹⁶ Schnackenburg, I:423-33.

⁹⁷ Ibid, I:429.

as the Messiah. Nevertheless, he takes her sinfulness for granted and perceives her answer that she has no husband as evasive. He suggests that the Samaritans, like the Jews, would have considered her frequent re-marriage as dishonorable and illegitimate, that she undoubtedly feels guilty about her wayward life, is held in low opinion and probably even ostracized by her fellow citizens.⁹⁸

Bultmann is in agreement with Schnackenburg about Jesus' request serving merely to demonstrate his supernatural knowledge of the woman's situation: "Jesus' request is only a means of demonstrating his own omniscience." The story presents Jesus as the prophet or divine man

who knows the secret things which are hidden from other men, and who knows the strangers whom he meets. This is the impression that he makes on the woman (v. 19), and it is what she tells the people in the town (v. 29). Her exclamation in v. 19 is not any expression of guilt, but simply a cry of amazement.⁹⁹

Bultmann minimizes the woman's role as witness, concluding that "He [the evangelist] has no special interest in the figure of the woman herself. . . . The details which he adds about the woman serve only to bring the Samaritans to Jesus."¹⁰⁰

Barnabas Lindars reveals a mixed reaction to the Samaritan woman. He credits her with extending a courtesy to Jesus by pointing out the differences between them, allowing him "to weigh up whether to insist on his request or to avoid possible subsequent embarrass-

⁹⁸ Schnackenburg, I:432-33. Cf. Brown, *Gospel*, 171; William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, Vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956) 148-49; Ben Witherington, *Women and the Genesis of Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 71; idem, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 59-60; Francis J. Moloney, *Belief in the Word: Reading the Fourth Gospel: John 1-4* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 148; William E. Hull, "John," in *Broadman Bible Commentary*, Vol. 9. (Nashville: Broadman, 1970), 253; Leon Morris, *Reflections on the Gospel of John*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), 138, asserts that "Clearly the woman was an expert at divorce!" He acknowledges that we know little about divorce among the Samaritans of the time, but thinks it fair to assume that their customs did not differ greatly from those of the Jews; Carson, 220-221, agrees that by "displaying his knowledge of her morally messy past," Jesus is revealing his supernatural knowledge, but argues that self-revelation is not the remark's only purpose. It is also intended to confront the woman with her need for the gift he is offering.

⁹⁹ Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, trans. by G. R. Beasley-Murray, R. W. N. Hoare and J. K. Riches (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971), 187-188.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 193.

ment on account of ceremonial defilement.”¹⁰¹ Yet, he accuses her of telling “a white lie” when she responds that she has no husband. He goes on to say that there is no indication that shame prompts her response; perhaps she only wants to obtain the water without having to return to Sychar.¹⁰² He further asserts that Jesus is displaying his special insight by “confronting her with her life-story There is no stress laid on the morals of the situation.”¹⁰³ By revealing “his power of perception, Jesus has denounced neither the woman’s character nor the Samaritan religion.”¹⁰⁴

Ernst Haenchen describes the woman as wondering why Jesus, being Jewish, would address her, a Samaritan. He acknowledges that the woman lives in sin, but states that “one should not inquire after the psychology of the woman but after the intention of the author. . . . How the woman came to be married five times holds no significance for the story; the Evangelist chooses not to speak of ‘lawless and vulgar’ matters.”¹⁰⁵ The point of the question and Jesus’ elaboration on her answer are intended to reveal Jesus’ supernatural knowledge. “Whoever asserts that Jesus wishes to lay bare her morals misunderstands the text.”¹⁰⁶

F. F. Bruce’s commentary, although traditional in approach, does acknowledge ambiguity concerning the Samaritan woman’s marital situation. He submits that the woman would have been taken aback by Jesus’ request that she call her husband because she would be naturally sensitive about that phase of her life. He suggests that since she recognized Jesus as a stranger and thought he would not know her history, she could “put him off with a bare statement of her present position.”¹⁰⁷ While he takes Jesus’ words in verse 18 as “a literal summary of her chequered married life,” he acknowledges that we do not know why she had so many husbands. “Perhaps one after another had divorced her because of some ‘unseemliness’ in the sense of Deut. 24:1, or she may have lost some of them by

¹⁰¹ Barnabas Lindars, *The Gospel of John*, NCB (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 180.

¹⁰² Ibid, 185. Cf. J. Ramsey Michaels, *John*, NIBC (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1989), 71, “Whatever feelings of guilt she may have had go unmentioned.”

¹⁰³ Lindars, 185ff.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 187.

¹⁰⁵ Haenchen, 221.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John: Introduction, Exposition and Notes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 106.

death. And now she was cohabiting with a man to whom she was not regularly married, possibly because of some legal impediment."¹⁰⁸

Literary Interpretations

A number of recent monographs, articles, and commentaries take a literary approach to the text. Joseph Cahill affirms the allegorical interpretation of the Samaritan woman from a literary perspective, maintaining that the "evident stress on worship suggests that the question about the woman's husband and the five men are [sic] really not all commentaries on literal sexual practice but rather references to 2 Kings 17:30-31, the five idolatrous cults of the Samaritans." He further suggests that the woman symbolizes false worship "under the metaphor of unholy marital alliances, a metaphor which immediately evokes the OT's equating of false worship with adultery."¹⁰⁹

This allegorical interpretation of the woman's husbands, harking back to some of the early interpretations, is rejected by most contemporary scholars, whether they take a traditional or literary approach.¹¹⁰ Thomas Brodie, however, writing a literary and theological commentary, acknowledges the dispute among scholars over whether the number of husbands is intended to correspond to the number of Samaritan false gods, but asserts that "there can be little doubt but that the woman's marital disorder is of a piece with the spiritual disorder of her people."¹¹¹

Mark Stibbe's literary approach finds the Samaritan woman both *realistic* and *representative*. He sees realism in the nature of her responses to Jesus: she expresses indignation at Jesus' request for water, she replies with sarcasm to Jesus' offer of living water, and she confesses reluctantly and laconically that she has no husband. Based on these responses, Stibbe concludes that "she is certainly no cardboard ste-

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. 107.

¹⁰⁹ P. Joseph Cahill, "Narrative Art in John IV," *Religious Studies Bulletin* 2 (1982): 44.

¹¹⁰ Bernard, *op. cit.*, 143-44, vigorously denies this interpretation as do Wilbert F. Howard, "The Gospel According to St. John," in *The Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 8. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1952), 525-26; Schnackenburg, I:433; Barrett, *op. cit.*, 235; Ridderbos, 159; Bultmann, 188, n3; Kysar, *John*, 65-66; George R. Beasley-Murray, 61; Bruce, 107; Brown, *Gospel*, 171, considers it a possible interpretation, but thinks it not likely to have been the evangelist's intention.

¹¹¹ Thomas L. Brodie, *The Gospel According to John: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 223.

reotype.”¹¹² With Jesus’ revelation that he is the Messiah, Stibbe sees the portrayal of the woman now becoming a *representative* one whose actions are to be interpreted symbolically. The leaving of her water jar symbolizes the disciple leaving everything to follow Jesus and her testimony to the townspeople symbolizes her development into a witness. Since through her word (*dia ton logon*, v. 39) many come to faith, she symbolizes the disciple become disciple-maker.¹¹³

Other recent monographs have emphasized Jesus’ request that the woman call her husband as the means by which Jesus reveals to her his supernatural knowledge. Many of these works do not even address the issue of her morality. For example, Robert Kysar, in *John’s Story of Jesus*, remarks about the five husbands that Jesus’ knowledge of the woman’s life situation wins her admiration, thereby reaffirming his conviction, expressed in his commentary, that moral judgment is lacking in the interchange.¹¹⁴ Charles Talbert compares the woman with Nathanael as a case in which Jesus’ knowledge of what is in a person leads to the person’s recognition of Jesus’ identity, with no discussion whatsoever of the morality issue.¹¹⁵ For Hendrikus Boers, the question concerning the woman’s marital status is unimportant for the story. The purpose of the interchange is to give evidence of Jesus’ miraculous knowledge, not to give information about the woman or her husbands.¹¹⁶ Both Kysar and Talbert attribute simple surprise to the woman when Jesus initially speaks to her.¹¹⁷ Boers repeatedly refers to the woman’s “mocking” of Jesus because he offers water but has no evident means by which to supply it.¹¹⁸

A more diverse group of interpreters has approached the story of the Samaritan woman from some narrowly focused perspective, looking there for support for a particular literary device or point of

¹¹² Mark Stibbe, *John* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 66.

¹¹³ Ibid, 66-67.

¹¹⁴ Robert Kysar, *John’s Story of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 30.

¹¹⁵ Charles Talbert, *Reading John: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Fourth Gospel and the Johannine Epistles* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 114. Cf. Teresa Okure, *The Johannine Approach to Mission: A Contextual Study of John 4:1-42* (Tubingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck) 1988), 108-110; Ben Witherington, *John’s Wisdom: A Commentary on the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 122.

¹¹⁶ Hendrikus Boers, *Neither on This Mountain Nor in Jerusalem: A Study of John 4* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 171.

¹¹⁷ Kysar, 29; Talbert, 112.

¹¹⁸ Boers, 161ff.

view. Paul Duke and Gail O'Day, who emphasize the irony in the woman's encounter with Jesus, are significant among these interpreters. O'Day discusses how the irony of the conversation gives the revelation of Jesus' supernatural knowledge an added impact for the reader. Both the woman and the reader are surprised, but for different reasons: the woman, by Jesus' knowledge of the truth; the reader both by the truth itself and by Jesus' ability to discern it.¹¹⁹ She describes the woman's initial reaction to Jesus' request as "amazement" and "astonishment," but never suggests any attitude of hostility or flippancy toward Jesus.¹²⁰ While she interprets the dialogue between Jesus and the woman as a vehicle for showing Jesus as the revealer, her claim that the overt irony of the interchange concerning the woman's marital status conveys "biting sarcasm" in Jesus' response, evidences conviction that the woman's situation is an immoral one.¹²¹ Nevertheless, O'Day concludes her presentation of the Samaritan woman on a positive and affirming note, with the comment that v. 39 "presents the woman in a very positive role: she is a witness who brings others to faith in Jesus."¹²²

Duke explores the pericope's irony in detail, referring to the woman as "a five-time loser and currently committed to an illicit affair" and a "tramp."¹²³ Duke further describes this entire episode between Jesus and the woman as a "type-scene" (borrowing terminology from Robert Alter¹²⁴) of betrothal at a well, a motif familiar to the evangelist's first-century readers from stories in the Old Testament (Gen. 24:10-61; 29:1-20; Exod. 2:15b-21). These stories have a common structure in which a man traveling in a foreign land goes to a well where he meets a maiden and asks for water. The water is given, after which the maiden hurries home to report on the incident, the man is invited to stay, and a betrothal results. Duke develops Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman within this literary structure pointing out the ironies of Jesus being the real giver of water and the woman turning out not to be a marriageable maiden.¹²⁵

¹¹⁹ Gail R. O'Day, *Revelation in the Fourth Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 67.

¹²⁰ Ibid, 58.

¹²¹ Ibid, 67.

¹²² Ibid, 87.

¹²³ Paul D. Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985), 102-103.

¹²⁴ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 51-62.

A notable variation on the “type-scene” approach to this text is an article by Danna Nolan Fewell and Gary Phillips.¹²⁶ They recognize the usefulness of these “betrothal typescenes,” but argue that oftentimes such literary conventions determine readers’ expectations and perceptions in stereotypical ways. Thus, they seek to move beyond such stereotypical characterizations of the Samaritan woman and present an intertextual analysis and comparison of the “well encounters” of Abraham’s servant, Eliezer, and Rebekah in Gen. 24 and Jesus and the Samaritan woman in John 4.

An important element of Fewell and Phillips’ article is an examination of Paul Gustave Doré’s wood engravings of these two well encounters to “illustrate in a visual medium . . . the typical efforts to construct character.”¹²⁷ The authors are critical of modern biblical commentators who have emphasized the woman’s intellectual obtuseness or her immoral character, as a result of reading her character through “theological lenses.”¹²⁸

Using Doré’s engravings as “visual typescenes” to compare the two biblical encounters, they suggest that the images are designed to evoke different reader responses. The Eliezer and Rebekah meeting of Gen. 24 is careful to present Rebekah as pure, youthful, and innocent; she is, after all, “to become the next matriarch of Israel.”¹²⁹ The Samaritan woman, by contrast, is presented as a sensual, earthy figure, with Jesus portrayed as a less physical and more otherworldly figure. They conclude that while Doré is obliged to make the theological point of Jesus’ divine significance, he is, as an artist, enamored with the female form. Therefore, despite the attempt to stereotype and contain her, she becomes the more interesting and compelling figure in the scene.¹³⁰

¹²⁵ Duke, 101-2; 183, n. 14. Cf. Cahill, 45-47; Martin Scott, *Sophia and the Johannine Jesus* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), 185-186; and Jeffrey Lloyd Staley, *The Print’s First Kiss: A Rhetorical Investigation of the Implied Reader in the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 99-103, who affirms the type-scene motif, but sees the John 4 episode as a deliberate parody of the Old Testament betrothal type-scene.

¹²⁶ Danna Nolan Fewell and Gary A. Phillips, “Drawn to Excess, or Reading Beyond Betrothal,” *Semeia* 77 (1997): 23-58.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 50. An interesting comparison can be made between this artistic depiction of the Samaritan woman in Doré’s wood engraving with the painted images of the Samaritan woman examined in Chapter Three. While Doré presents

In this manner, Fewell and Phillips, though persuaded of the Samaritan woman's immorality, propose that she actually functions as an agent of change for Jesus, giving him a new appreciation for what it means to exist in a human body. They imagine the possibility that this woman "has encouraged Jesus to rethink the nature of what 'living water' needs to be," and that he learned from her that he was to be a Messiah for the Samaritans.¹³¹ Clearly, they intend by their study to present the Samaritan woman in a positive light even while acknowledging her sinful lifestyle.

Lyle Eslinger, Calum Carmichael and John Bligh all study the Samaritan woman passage as a sensual or suggestive sexual encounter between Jesus and the woman.¹³² Eslinger accuses the woman of suggesting promiscuity by loading her part of the conversation with sexual innuendo, describing her in such demeaning and derogatory terms as "provocative," "coy," "lascivious," "brazen," and "carnal."¹³³ Carmichael refrains from derogatory remarks about the woman, but emphasizes the bridegroom imagery from John the Baptist's comment in John 3:29 as support for a matrimonial intent.¹³⁴ Bligh thinks that the woman lied to Jesus about having no husband because she had matrimonial designs on him, pointing out the parallel Old Testament scenes of betrothals as a result of meeting at a well and also referring to John the Baptist's bridegroom language.¹³⁵

her as a sensual figure in comparison with Rebekah, the majority of paintings examined for this study portray the Samaritan woman in a demure and respectable fashion.

¹³¹ Ibid, 51.

¹³² Luise Schottroff also analyzes the John 4 text for "a perception of sexuality in the Gospel of John," but with the intent of offering it as a model "to which Christians today can refer in their desire to overcome the traditional negative Christian view of sexuality." "The Samaritan Woman and the Notion of Sexuality in the Fourth Gospel," in *Literary and Social Readings of the Fourth Gospel*, trans. Linda M. Moloney, vol. II, *What is John?* ed. Fernando F. Segovia (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 157.

¹³³ Lyle Eslinger, "The Wooing of the Woman at the Well: Jesus, the Reader and Reader-Response Criticism," in *The Gospel of John as Literature: An Anthology of Twentieth-Century Perspectives* (Leiden & New York: E.J. Brill, 1993), 165-182.

¹³⁴ Calum M. Carmichael, "Marriage and the Samaritan Woman," *New Testament Studies* 26 (1980): 332-346.

¹³⁵ John Bligh, "Jesus in Samaria," *Heythrop Journal* 3 (1962): 329-46. Okure, *op. cit.*, 108 completely rejects Bligh's hypothesis on the basis of v. 9, that Jews and Samaritans have no use for each other. "Given the well documented mutual hatred which existed between Jews and Samaritans and of which the woman herself is fully aware (v 9a,b, 20), a marital design on Jesus on her part would be most unlikely, if not completely out of the question."

C. Clifton Black's application of rhetorical analysis to the Samaritan woman pericope results in a remarkably favorable presentation of her.¹³⁶ Initially he credits her with being "a quick study: Markedly responsive to 'the gift of God' (4:10; cf. 3:3-4). She advances so far in her understanding of Jesus' significance (4:9, 11, 19, 29) that by the story's end she bears witness of it to others (4:28-30, 39)."¹³⁷ He goes on to affirm that most of Jesus' remarks to the woman show his intention to clarify her understanding of religious matters not to "elicit her judgment about past events nor to spur her future action."¹³⁸

Black acknowledges the author's use of the Old Testament betrothal type-scene that unfolds around a well, but insists that this form serves to identify the God of Israel's history as "the Father of Jesus and the Samaritan woman," resulting in a betrothal "not in marriage but in worship (4:21-24) and mission (4:35-42)."¹³⁹ Black further posits that this encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman is presented in John for the same reason the other components are included: "so that you may come to believe [or "continue to believe"] that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name" (20:31).¹⁴⁰

Concerning Jesus' request for the woman to bring her husband, Black dismisses the question as to whether the exchange should be taken literally or symbolically. "Ultimately the central issue is no more the woman's sexual history than the Samaritans' alleged apostasy . . . the crux of the matter is whether Jesus may be trusted as the revealer of the truth about human life and the life of God."¹⁴¹ He also points to the text's silence about the woman's moral turpitude or any virtue in her evangelism associated with her gender. Black then concludes that rhetorical interpretation of John 4 provides the means to expose the shortcomings of presuppositions about race and sex so that the text can communicate its theological purpose of inviting its readers to faith in Jesus Christ as "the Savior of the world."¹⁴²

¹³⁶ C. Clifton Black, "Rhetorical Criticism," in *Hearing the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 265-273.

¹³⁷ Black, 265-266.

¹³⁸ Ibid, 266.

¹³⁹ Ibid, 271.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid, 273.

¹⁴² Ibid.

Feminist Interpretations

Because this pericope involves a woman in conversation with Jesus, a number of feminist scholars have studied it. Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza highlights the Samaritan woman's role as a witness to Jesus. Commenting generally on the inclusive role of women and men in leadership of the Johannine community, she finds it "astonishing that the evangelist gives women such a prominent place in the narrative."¹⁴³ Speaking specifically of the Samaritan woman, Schüssler-Fiorenza credits her with a primary role as missionary in the conversion of the Samaritans. She draws an analogy between the woman's testimony as motivation for the Samaritans coming to Jesus and Andrew's drawing of Peter to Jesus by his confession that "we have found the Messiah" (1:40-42).¹⁴⁴

Sandra Schniders affirms the apostolic nature of the Samaritan woman's witness. Because of her words, many Samaritans came to believe in Jesus. She points out the parallel between 4:39 where we are told that many believed in him because of her word (*dia ton logon*) and Jesus' description of the apostolic mission in 17:20 where he prays not only for those present with him, but also for those who would come to believe through their word (*dia tou logou*). She concludes that "Jesus is evidently filled with joy at the woman's work (4:35), which he recognizes as a realization of his own mission to do the will of the one who sent him."¹⁴⁵ In a more recent monograph, Schniders elaborates further on the identity and role of the Samaritan woman, affirming her symbolic and exemplary character as a "Christian Disciple-Apostle."¹⁴⁶

A recent variation among feminist interpretations of the Samaritan woman is to understand her in light of Jewish and early Christian wisdom literature. This perspective is reflected broadly in Ben Witherington's commentary, and is specifically applied to the Samaritan woman pericope in Martin Scott's monograph and in the master's thesis of Jane Webster.¹⁴⁷ Both Scott and Webster seek to

¹⁴³ Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 326.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 327-328.

¹⁴⁵ Sandra M. Schniders, "Women in the Fourth Gospel and the Role of Women in the Contemporary Church," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 12 (1982): 40.

¹⁴⁶ Sandra M. Schniders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), 186-194.

¹⁴⁷ Jane Suzanne Webster, "Transcending Alterity: The Proverbial Strange

interpret the Samaritan woman against the portrayal of Wisdom in Proverbs. Scott views her positively and points to the woman's response to Jesus as "precisely that which is expected of the true disciple of wisdom: she listens, discusses and learns." Therefore, he concludes that the Samaritan woman, as a witness, can be identified with the role of Wisdom's servant-girl who goes out to invite people to Wisdom/Jesus' banquet (Prov. 9:3-5).¹⁴⁸

Webster, however, rejects Scott's identification and suggests rather that the attributes of the Samaritan woman are more consistent with Wisdom's "polar opposite, Strange Woman." She bases this identification upon the text's emphases on "the Samaritan woman as female, as foreign and as unknowing, over against Jesus as male, Jewish and knowing." As a result of her encounter with Jesus, the possibility arises of transcending these differences so that "the symbol of the Proverbial Strange Woman is reconfigured in the Samaritan Woman of the Fourth Gospel."¹⁴⁹

SUMMARY

Thus we sample something of the interpretive history of this pericope from Patristic times until the present. The pre-Reformation Church, both East and West, clearly saw the Samaritan woman in a positive light, emphasizing her role as convert and witness. The allegorical association of her husbands with the five human senses or with foreign gods worshiped by the Samaritans meant that little commentary was directed to her personal morality. She was, however, assumed to be involved in an illicit relationship and to have been promiscuous in her past.

With the changing theological currents of Calvinism, more direct condemnation fell upon the Samaritan woman. The Reformed perspective persisted as the dominant portrayal of her throughout the era of the hegemony of the historical-critical methodology until the late twentieth century. In recent years, with the new plurality of interpretive methods, once again some positive light is being shed upon the Samaritan woman by emphasizing her role as witness. Even

Woman Meets the Johannine Samaritan Woman" (unpublished M.A. thesis, McMaster University, 1996). Cf. n. 114 for Witherington; n. 124 for Scott.

¹⁴⁸ Scott, 190.

¹⁴⁹ Webster, 6-7.

so, in most cases, her past life and present situation are perceived as immoral.

Regardless of the methodology used, it is apparent that the woman has been regarded predominantly as promiscuous, at least until she becomes a witness toward the end of the episode. A number of the more recent commentaries and monographs, particularly those taking a literary or feminist approach, have treated her less harshly. The alternative interpretation proposed in chapter five is presented with the hope of causing interpreters to reconsider their unexamined preconceptions about her and to evaluate the possibility of seeing her in a different light. Sandra Schneiders expresses well the perspective that I bring to the passage in my interpretation:

In the history of exegesis and preaching a great deal has been made of this woman's irregular marital situation, very little of the clear indications of her apostleship, and virtually nothing of the vindication of her role against the implicit disapproval of the male members of the community. The importance of this scene for the contemporary discussion about the role of women is obvious enough, but we can see that it is only when we put a new question to the Gospel text that certain heretofore unseen aspects of the NT message come to light.¹⁵⁰

While the scope of this study cannot address all the issues Schneiders raises, perhaps it will at least pose a new question and illuminate previously unseen aspects of the text.

¹⁵⁰ Schneiders, *Revelatory Text*, 134.

CHAPTER THREE

THE SAMARITAN WOMAN AS ARTISTS HAVE PAINTED HER

In the predominantly post-Christian culture of our age, the traditional relationship between religion and art has undergone dramatic changes both in subject matter and in artistic style. Churches and chapels today are rarely decorated with frescoes of biblical scenes or sculptures of biblical and ecclesiastical figures nor does secular art turn so often to the Bible for its subject matter as it did in times past. Historically, however, throughout the Christian Era, the history of art has been intimately associated with the life of the Church. As early as the second century C.E., Christian ornamentation decorated the Roman catacombs, and from the time of Constantine, religious art dominated the art of the Christian world.

That religious themes and feelings should seek expression in art is not surprising, for both art and religious experience are affective in nature.

Both [artistic and theological endeavor] have their roots tangled in the rich subsoil of man's feeling and awareness. Each is vulnerable to and acted upon by the other, whether consciously or unconsciously. Man the maker and man the thinker are not two kinds of man but elementally one.¹

Both Christians and creative artists have a common concern with the human mystery, and religious art has traditionally been characterized by the intimate relation between idea and image. The idea, taking form in the artist's mind and heart, is reflected in the image, then the image influences idea, as both the artist and the viewer are transformed by contemplation of the image. Paolo Berdini has described this relationship as "visual exegesis," in which

The painter reads the text and translates his scriptural reading into a problem in representation, to which he offers a solution—the image. In that image the beholder acknowledges, not the text in the abstract,

¹ Roger Hazelton and Dorothy A. Austin, "Emerging Images in Teaching Religion and the Arts" in *Humanities, Religion, and the Arts Tomorrow* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), 204.

but the painter's reading of the text so that the effect the image has on the beholder is a function of what the painter wants the beholder to experience in the text. . . . Painting is not the simple visualization of the narrative of the text but an expansion of that text, subject to discursive strategies of various kinds.²

At various times in the church's history, it imposed strict guidelines for the depiction of religious figures, but always the images were filtered through the mind and imagination of the artist who created them. Thus, the artists became in some sense biblical interpreters. True enough, they were often directed by the Church as to what was theologically allowable in their artistic expression, but they also influenced the Church's interpretation as their paintings gave visual vitality and reality to biblical characters and events.

The early church recognized the power of art to communicate, and from its earliest days, it capitalized on visual images as a medium of instruction and edification. Even during the Middle Ages, when the Church was the great patron of art, it never viewed art as an end in itself; it was always considered a tool for instruction. "The picture is to the illiterate," said Pope Gregory, "what the written word is to the educated."³ In like vein Peter Comestor asserted, "The paintings of the churches are in place of books to the uneducated,"⁴ and according to John of Damascus, "What the book is to the literate, the image is to the illiterate."⁵ Add to the general illiteracy of the age the scarcity of written material prior to the invention of the printing press in the late fifteenth century and the stage was set for art to assume a major role of communication to the Christian populace.

Beyond its educational value, however, Christian art has served as an aid to devotion. Again Gregory the Great, in defending the use of images by the church, asserted their value for reminding the

² Paolo Berdini, *The Religious Art of Jacopo Bassano: Painting as Visual Exegesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1997), 35. For an extended discussion of the artist's role in establishing "the relationship between a text and its visualization," see Berdini, 1-35.

³ Quoted in Louis Gillet, "Painting, Religious," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1913. Cf. Martin D. W. Jones, *The Counter Reformation: Religion and Society in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995), 15.

⁴ Gillet.

⁵ John of Damascus, *On the Divine Images: Three Apologies Against Those Who Attack the Divine Images*, trans. by David Anderson (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980), 25.

faithful of that which is to be adored and worshipped.⁶ Christian art also, in some sense, influences theology, for visual images often serve to shape the imagination and interpret experience. "Artistic drama is not the imitation of the externals of an action, which would be no more than illustration. It is a making manifest, for good or evil, the moral purpose of human acts."⁷ The principle analogized, then, is that in surveying the artistic depictions of Christ and the Samaritan woman, the theology of the times will be reflected. The artists' conceptions of this event, while expressing the painter's own artistic sense, are at the same time formed and, to some extent, controlled by the religious environment in which they work. Because of the formative nature of the Church's influence upon these artistic works, to some degree it is possible to detect the Church's interpretive assessment of a biblical text by studying the works of art that depict it.

In assessing a work of narrative art, the viewer is called upon to perform a formidable work of interpretation. The artist attempts to capture in a static moment the entire essence of an event or an encounter. The viewer, then, must know the story and attempt to read the artist's conception of that story from clues provided in the painting itself. Sometimes the artist will choose to feature the seminal moment of an encounter; at other times, the artist takes the liberty of compressing the events of an extended narrative into a single compositional scene.

In addition to the narrative elements included in the painting, interpretive clues may be found in spatial relationships, facial expressions, gestures, setting, and clothing. Beyond the painting itself, the sources from which the artist draws and the artistic precedents that influence the artist, provide important guides for understanding the artist's work. Thus, these influences and aspects of artistic composition will be the dominant issues assessed in the works of art examined here.

⁶ John W. Dixon, Jr. "Painting As Theological Thought: The Issues in Tuscan Theology," in *Art, Creativity, and the Sacred: An Anthology in Religion and Art*, edited by Diane Apostolos-Cappadona (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 278.

⁷ Ibid., 281.

THE PATRISTIC PERIOD AND THE MIDDLE AGES

The story of Christ's encounter with the Samaritan woman furnishes one of the early themes of Christian art. The main reason for the frequent occurrence of this image relates to the early church's association of baptism with the "living water" Jesus made known to the Samaritan woman. The water of baptism was contrasted with the water from Jacob's well, which was incapable of eternally quenching one's thirst. This story also points to Christ's abolition of the distinctions between Jews and Samaritans, an important issue for Gentile Christians.⁸ According to Walter Lowrie, the Samaritan woman at the well

was in fact a favorite theme in the catacombs and in later art, partly because it is an instance of Jesus' interest in persons who were not Jews, and perhaps chiefly because of the saying, 'Whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst, but the water that I shall give him shall become in him a well of water springing up unto eternal life' (1 John 4:14).⁹

Dating from the late second or early third century, there are fresco paintings representing this scene in the Roman catacombs of Calixtus, Praetextatus, and Domatilla, as well as in the Christian chapel at Dura-Europos (figs. 1, 2). This scene appears in the fourth century on sarcophagi of Rome and Gaul, and in the sixth century, it is found in a mosaic cycle (fig. 3) and in the ivory relief on Maximian's throne at Ravenna (fig. 4), in the Syrian Rabula Gospels, and on a gold medallion from Adana in Asia Minor. During the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the scene occurs in manuscript and prayer book illumination (fig. 5), in mosaics at Monreale and Venice, in frescoes, on bronze door portals, and on decorative columns (fig. 6).¹⁰ After the twelfth century, however, it is extremely rare until it again becomes a frequent subject in paintings of the Renaissance and Baroque periods. During this period of the Middle Ages, the event lost its allusion to baptism, and the Samaritan woman became associated with the adulteress of John 8:1-11, an association portrayed in the Golden Gospels from Echternach in Nuremberg (fig.

⁸ Gertrude Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art*, Vol. 1, trans. Janet Seligman (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1971), 159.

⁹ Walter Lowrie, *Art in the Early Church* (New York: Harper & Row, 1947), 58.

¹⁰ Schiller, 159.



1. *Christ and the Woman of Samaria*. Wall painting. 3rd century. Rome, Cemetery of Callixtus. Credit: Scala/Art Resource, NY



2. *The Samaritan Woman*. Wall painting. 3rd century. Dura-Europos, Syria. Credit: Yale University Art Gallery, Dura-Europos Collection



3. *The Woman of Samaria at the Well*. Mosaic. 520-26 C.E. San Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna, Italy. Credit: Alinari/Art Resource, NY



4. *Samaritan Woman at the Well*. Ivory relief. 545-56 C.E. Throne of Maximian, Musco Arcivescovile, Ravenna, Italy. Credit: Alinari/Art Resource, NY



5. *Christ and the Woman of Samaria*. Pen and ink drawing. 1190. Central Rhine, Prayer Book of Hildegard of Bingen. Credit: Foto Marburg/Art Resource, NY



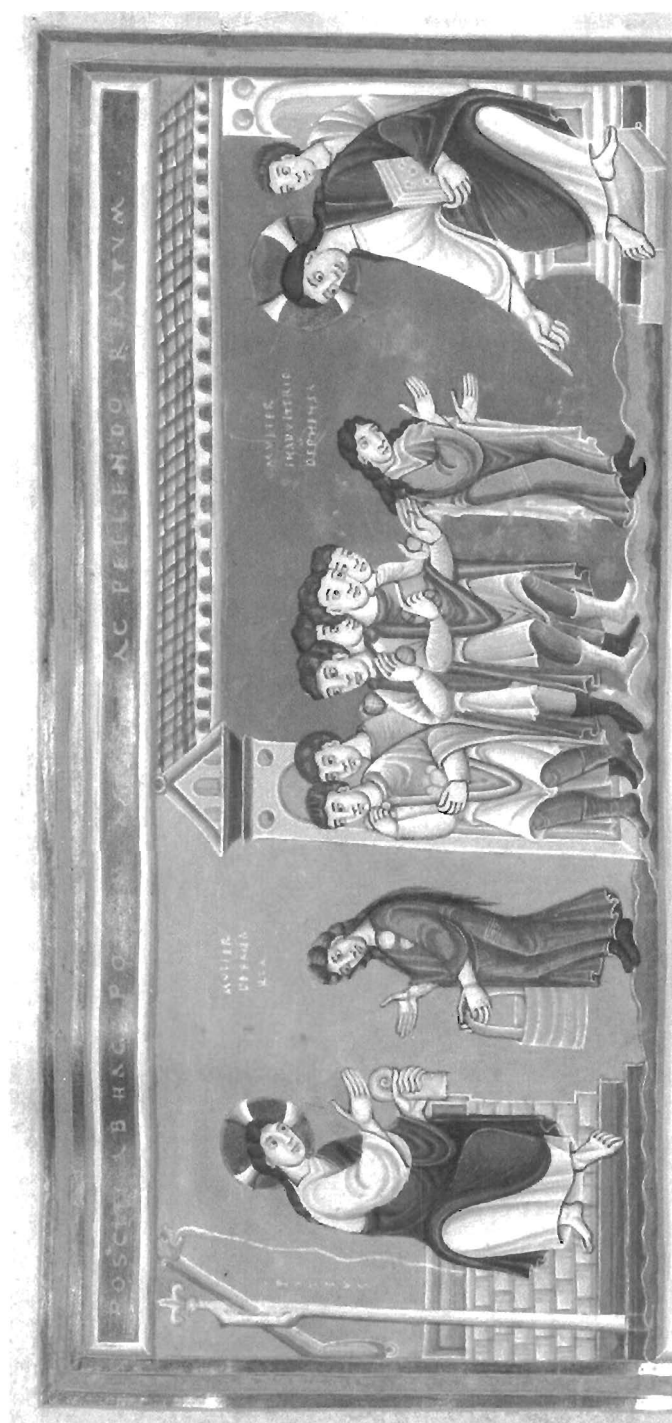
6. *Christ and the Woman of Samaria*. Bronze relief. 1015-22. Column of Bernward. Cathedral, Hildesheim, Germany. Credit: Anthony Scibilia/Art Resource, NY

7), dated to the eleventh century.¹¹ This summary of the various artistic media that preserve the encounter of Jesus and the Samaritan woman is offered to show the popularity of this event in early Christian settings. In this chapter, however, the artistic depictions analyzed will concentrate primarily on paintings, with only occasional reference to other artistic forms.

The earliest Christian art known to us is preserved in images painted on the walls of a house-church baptistery at Dura-Europos, a Roman colony in Mesopotamia, and on the walls and ceilings of Roman catacombs.¹² Interestingly, the encounter of Jesus with the Samaritan woman at a well is portrayed in both of these locations, evidence of the significance and popularity of this event for the early church.

¹¹ Ibid, 160.

¹² Andre Grabar, *Early Christian Art: From the Rise of Christianity to the Death of Theodosius*, trans. Stuart Gilbert and James Emmons (New York: Odysses Press, 1969), 67.



7. An unnamed monk. *Christ and the Samaritan Women*. Illuminated manuscript. 11th century. Germanisches Museum, Nürnberg, Germany. Credit: Germanisches Museum, Nürnberg, Germany

Based upon the choice of subjects¹³ in these early paintings and their locations, scholars have drawn the legitimate conclusion that the pictures had a didactic purpose.¹⁴ While aesthetic effect was a consideration, the choice and combinations of figures and events seem clearly intended to convey a particular message. This message is one of assurance to believers of God's loving kindness, of the efficacy of the sacraments, of the certainty of salvation, and of the way of Christian living. These lessons were apparently considered especially appropriate at baptism, where neophytes were initiated into the faith community, and at death, when Christians entered into new life beyond the grave. Decorating baptisteries and burial chambers with images that recalled the faithfulness of other believers served to edify the new believer and to console the bereaved.¹⁵

These earliest Christian illustrations, dating to the second or third century, are characterized by a striking simplicity of style (see figs. 1, 2). The figures are usually few in number and treated in a simple manner with only a minimal use of color. This symbolic style, suggesting more than it actually represented, was popular in Rome for the decoration of pagan tombs. Apparently, the early Christian artists adopted the style and method of secular art and simply adapted it to Christian subjects.¹⁶

In pagan tombs the practice was to decorate with mythological figures and stories as paradigms of what could be expected in the afterlife. Christians simply adopted the same practice but substituted Christian themes, i.e. Old Testament stories, for the mythological characters.¹⁷ The evidence of this pagan tradition is further

¹³ The subjects of these paintings are primarily depictions of Old and New Testament events that reinforce and affirm the faith of Christian believers, e.g. the Good Shepherd with his sheep, Jonah being delivered from the whale, Adam and Eve, etc.

¹⁴ Grabar, 67; Cf. David Talbot Rice, *The Beginnings of Christian Art* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1957), 25; Lowrie, 5-6.

¹⁵ Grabar, 67.

¹⁶ Grabar, 68. Cf. Wendy Beckett, *The Story of Painting* (London: Dorling Kindersley, 1994), 24.

¹⁷ Grabar, 68. The decorations in pagan tombs used heads, busts, and animals from mythology. The Christian catacomb paintings clearly paralleled this pagan idea, but their subjects were taken from the Bible. Old Testament favorites were Jonah, Noah's ark, Daniel in the lion's den, the sacrifice of Isaac, etc. New Testament themes that became particular favorites were the adoration of the Magi, the raising of Lazarus, the Good Shepherd, the baptism of Jesus, the Good Samaritan, Jesus and the Samaritan woman, etc. Graydon F. Snyder, *Ante Pacem: Archaeological Evidence of Church Life Before Constantine* (Macon, GA: Mercer Univ. Press, 1985), 45-65.

evident in the simplistic style of early Christian art. Mention has been made of the limited color and small number of figures in these early Christian paintings. This same tendency toward simplicity was widespread in first century Roman decorative painting.¹⁸

Dura-Europos

The wall paintings of the Christian church baptistery at Dura-Europos represent the only known early Christian art preserved in the eastern realm of Christianity. Dating to the early third century and contemporary with Roman catacomb painting, these paintings are the only above-ground Christian art from this earliest period. The presence at Dura-Europos of a synagogue and mithraeum¹⁹ with far more extensive and monumental wall paintings, gives further indication that early Christian art copied from the art in the world around it (fig. 8).

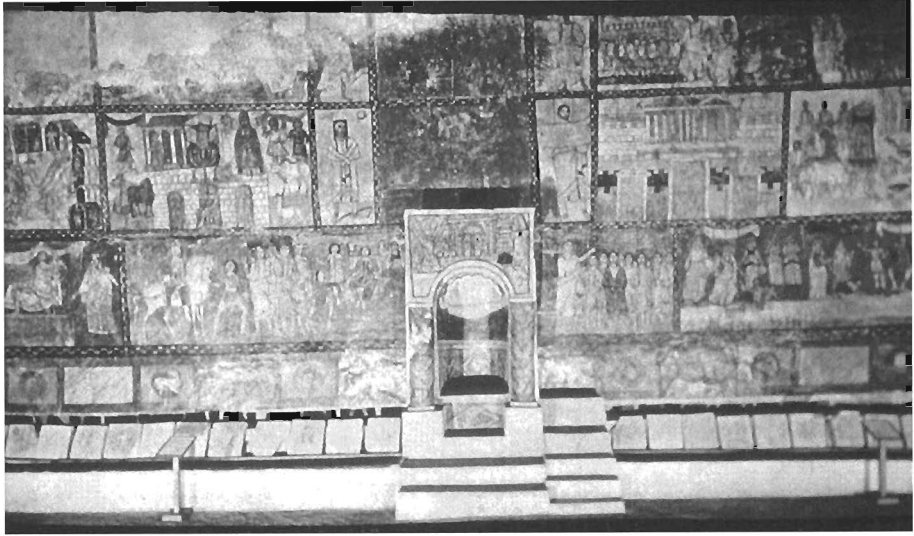
While Rome was responsible for bringing these three religions—Judaism, Mithraism, and Christianity—to Dura-Europos, their respective buildings reflected the local artistic and cultural traditions. The presence of painted decorations on the walls of their buildings follows typical Mesopotamian practice. As far as archaeologists have been able to tell, all early Mesopotamian temples were decorated with registers and panels of wall paintings illustrating aspects of cult ceremonies and images of the temple deity.²⁰ The only difference between the local Durene temples and those of the religions introduced by the Romans was in the subject matter of the paintings.

The synagogue, mithraeum, and Christian chapel, while reflecting their respective religious trends that were evident throughout the Roman empire in the second and third centuries C.E., all adhere to local Durene practices in plan and decoration. Thus, while the subject matter of their respective wall paintings is appropriate to their religious beliefs, the presence or fact of these wall paintings and their

¹⁸ Ibid. Grabar includes reproductions of simple Roman paintings such as a vase with a single bird on either side of it, 82; a representation of Eros that shows a childish figure bending to grasp a cluster of flowers, 95; a harvest scene that is composed of a generic human figure and several stalks of grain, 96, etc.

¹⁹ A mithraeum was a shrine to the mystery cult of the god Mithra. The one at Dura-Europos is described in detail by Marie-Henriette Gates, "Dura-Europos: A Fortress of Syro-Mesopotamian Art," *Biblical Archaeologist* 47 (September 1984): 176-177.

²⁰ Gates, 170.



8. View of the Western Wall. 3rd century. Jewish Synagogue, Dura-Europos, Syria. Credit: The Jewish Museum, NY/Art Resource, NY

arrangement in registers and panels, testifies to the influence of Mesopotamian prototypes.²¹

All religious artifacts from Dura-Europos are described as having an “oriental” character consistent with characteristic Mesopotamian traditions.²² Ancient Mesopotamian temples were located in residential areas and were entered from the street. Inside would be a large courtyard framed by small chapels, and at the back of the court, a small sanctuary room with a niche for the cult statue to be placed. All the religious structures found at Dura—pagan temples, the synagogue, and the Christian chapel—followed this Mesopotamian pattern.²³

The Christian chapel, which is the focus of this study, is the most modest of these three structures, having been converted from a private house built in 232/3 C.E. The baptistery is its only decorated room, painted with appropriate scenes in a decidedly primitive style (fig. 9). Unfortunately its paintings are in bad condition and much of the detail is lost. However, in addition to the depic-

²¹ According to Gates, 169-170, the Temple of the Palmyrene Gods and the Temple of Zeus Theos at Dura, both dated to the second century C.E., were embellished with several registers of painted wall decorations. The synagogue, mithraeum, and Christian chapel all followed this same decorative scheme.

²² Ibid, 169.

²³ Ibid.



9. Dura-Europos Christian House Baptistry, 3rd century. Reconstruction at Yale University Art Gallery. Credit: Yale University Art Gallery. Dura-Europos Collection

tion of the Samaritan woman at the well (see fig. 10 for orientation of this figure in the chapel; fig. 2 for detail), there are illustrations of the Good Shepherd with his flock, Adam and Eve, Christ healing the paralytic, Christ walking on the water, and the three women's visit to the tomb on Easter morning—subjects reminiscent of those in the Roman catacombs.²⁴

All of these early paintings suggest only limited artistic skill; the figures lack clarity and the brushwork is irregular. They are “drawn in a sketchy manner with heavy sweeps of the brush to show outlines and interior details.”²⁵ A typical stylistic feature of the figures in all these Durene temples, perhaps a legacy of the Parthians, is the presentation of all human figures facing the viewer, i.e. a convention of frontality.²⁶

The color scheme mimics the red and yellow tones common to the other Dura religious structures, with some blue and grey-green to enliven the standard black and the white of the plaster wall. There is no highlighting and little attention paid to composition. The scenes are placed on the wall, seemingly at random (in contrast to the narrative sequences of the synagogue paintings; see fig. 9), giving further evidence of their didactic value versus visual effect.²⁷

As in Rome, so in Dura-Europos: there is no distinguishing between pagan and Christian artistic style. The difference lay in the subject matter. Nor was there, in these third-century illustrations, any significant distinction between the artistic style of the Christian pictures in the Roman catacombs of the West and those of the Dura-Europos wall frescoes in the East. Depicting essentially equivalent scenes and subjects, both locales utilized “frontality, stiff poses and stock gestures, two-dimensional renderings, [and a] lack of interest in the natural body.”²⁸

In the portrayal of the Samaritan woman (fig. 2), these elements of artistic minimalism are readily apparent. The woman is shown

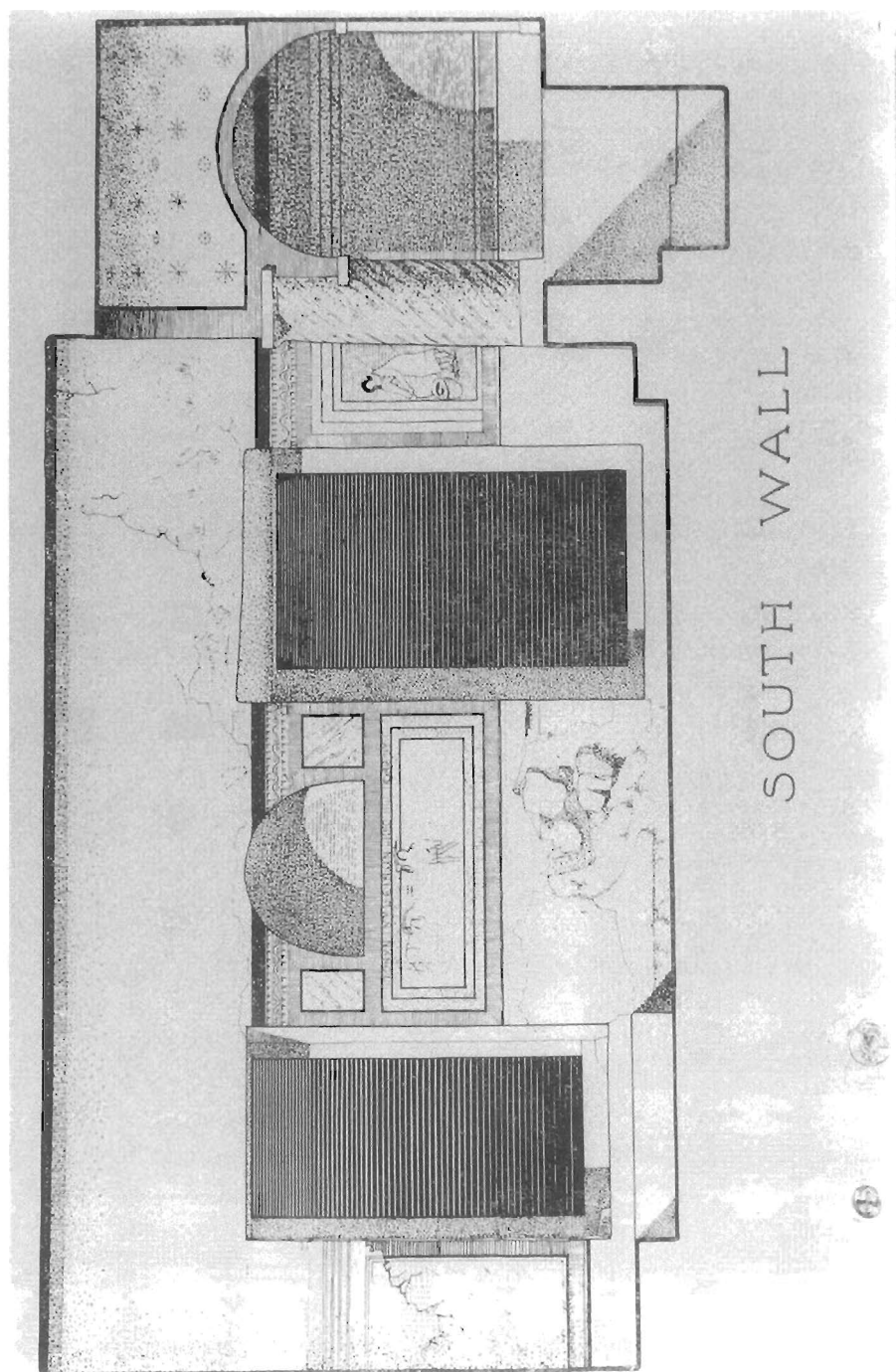
²⁴ C. R. Morey, *Early Christian Art* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1953), 66.

²⁵ Ann L. Perkins, *The Art of Dura-Europos* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 54.

²⁶ All the Old Testament figures depicted in the Jewish synagogue paintings face the viewer (fig. 9) as does the figure of Mithra in the mithraeum. The same is true of the figures in the earlier temples of the Palmyrene Gods and of Zeus Theos, Gates, 170, 175, 177. Cf. Perkins, 53.

²⁷ Perkins, 55.

²⁸ Ibid. Cf. Morey, *Early Christian Art*, 66.



10. Dura-Europos Christian House Baptistery, South wall. Artist's rendering, 3rd century. Credit: Kracling, Plate XXXIII/J. J. Augustin, Inc.

leaning forward toward the well, letting down her bucket, but like all the baptistery paintings, her figure is drawn in a sketchy manner. The brush strokes are intense and her figure appears clumsy and ungainly. She is seen frontally. Her pose is stiff, the third dimension is lacking, and there is no sense of natural body movement.²⁹

It is impossible to determine any emotion in the woman's face as the features are mostly missing, and where present, they are indicated only by the briefest outline of the brush. Perkins notes that her garment is nondescript, depicted schematically with little indication of the natural line and fall of clothing. Her hair, as well, is drawn in primitive fashion with only the slightest hint of realism.³⁰

Perhaps because of space limitations, the figure of Jesus is missing so it is impossible to draw any conclusions about the nature of his encounter with the Samaritan woman from this painting. The absence of Jesus from this painting, in a location reminiscent of Jesus' redemptive work, indicates that the Samaritan woman herself was a sufficient reminder to those who saw the picture that she was an important figure in Jesus' earthly ministry. It satisfies its didactic purpose of reminding the viewer of this incident in the ministry of Jesus and his promise to give "living water" to those who accept him.

The Catacombs

The decoration of Christian tombs with figural religious paintings was an imitation of pagan practice at the time. The difference was in the subject matter. The pagan tombs were decorated with mythological subjects whereas the Christian paintings drew their themes initially from Old Testament stories. The oldest catacomb paintings in Rome date from the late second century, and New Testament themes appear by the early third century, making them roughly contemporary with the frescoes in the Dura-Europos baptistery.³¹ The style of the catacomb painting, like that of Dura-Europos, is simple and archaic, typical of the decorative style prevailing in Rome during the late second and early third centuries.³²

These earliest decorations were largely symbolic pictures such as an anchor representing hope and security, a palm branch symbolizing

²⁹ Perkins, 54-55.

³⁰ Ibid, 115.

³¹ See notes 17 and 18 for descriptions of pagan and Christian subject matter in catacomb paintings.

³² Grabar, 82.

victory over death, or a dove with olive branch signifying the everlasting peace derived from faith. By the third century, the well-known fish symbol, allegorically representing Christ, is found. Other favorite depictions were the Good Shepherd carrying a lamb on his shoulders and a figure kneeling in prayer (the Orante), both alluding to the joy of heaven.³³

Over time, new types of pictures and new symbology developed to represent Christian beliefs and hopes concerning death and resurrection. For example, the souls of the dead were portrayed as praying female figures. Baptism and Jesus' miracle of multiplying the loaves and fishes were seen as allusions to the means of grace by which heaven was attained. Paintings of Noah's deliverance from the flood, Isaac's rescue from sacrifice by Abraham, Jonah's escape from the belly of the great fish, Daniel's preservation from the lions, were all common catacomb pictures typifying the Christian's escape from death. The raising of Lazarus was a favorite reminder of resurrection from death; depictions of Jesus' healing miracles signified his power as Son of God over sickness and death; banqueting scenes became reminders of the Eucharist by the addition of a cross emblem impressed upon the bread or by juxtaposing loaves and fishes; and the Samaritan woman at the well became a symbol for baptism and the living water that Jesus provided. Thus various biblical themes became linked to specific Christian concepts and offered consolation and hope in the face of death.³⁴

Among the Roman catacomb paintings of Christ and the Samaritan woman, one of the least sophisticated representations is found in the Chapel of the Sacraments in the cemetery of Callixtus (fig. 1). The figures, both of the woman and of Christ, are strictly symbolic. Indeed without the presence of the well to define the scene, it would not be possible to identify either figure as to gender, they are so sketchily drawn. As in the Dura baptistery painting, the woman is depicted frontally, drawing a bucket from the well. The Jesus figure sits some distance away holding a scroll. Because the painting lacks detail and the figures are not painted with any identifiable facial expression, it is impossible to determine the attitude of the woman and the nature of her response to Jesus.

³³ Snyder, 19-25.

³⁴ Snyder, 13-29.



11. *Christ and the Samaritan Woman*. Pen and ink rendering of wall painting. 3rd century. Rome, Cemetery of Praetextatus. Credit: Farrar, p. 333.

Another catacomb painting, reproduced in a pen and ink drawing, is found in the catacomb of Praetextatus (fig. 11).³⁵ Probably dating from the early third century, it is still stylistically plain, but depicts more detail in the figures. As in the earlier example, the figures are identifiable, but their facial expressions do not convey any attitude or sentiment. Jesus gestures to indicate his speaking role and the woman appears to be listening intently. Interestingly, the figure of Christ is portrayed in the form of a youthful Hermes with short, curly hair, an example of how early Christian art draws from pagan art forms.³⁶ A further indication of this Hellenistic³⁷ influence

³⁵ Frederic W. Farrar, *The Life of Christ as Represented in Art* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1901), 333.

³⁶ C. R. Morey, *Christian Art* (New York: Norton, 1958), 6. Cf. Jane Dillenberger, *Style and Content in Christian Art* (New York: Abingdon, 1965), 42.

³⁷ Hellenistic culture, which prevailed in the Mediterranean region from the death of Alexander until well after the Roman Empire became the dominant power,

is the Greek-style chiton and himation in which the Christ figure is dressed. This depiction also reflects the natural body movements and non-frontal posture of the Alexandrian painting style that prevailed in Italy and Egypt during this early period.³⁸

The Early Middle Ages

With the Edict of Milan in 313, which recognized Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire, a profound transformation of religious painting took place. The Good Shepherd of the catacombs and the simple representational scenes gradually disappeared to be replaced by magnificent illustrations of Christ triumphant in both painting and mosaics. The images continued to be narrative and historical in character, for the Church readily capitalized on the efficacy of images as an effective means of instruction, but they also became splendid and majestic testimonies to the life of the Church. From the fourth century to the sixth century, the Samaritan woman was not a conspicuous figure in ecclesiastical art; indeed, very little Christian art from the fourth century remains today.³⁹

The other significant change in Christian art took place following the conquest of Rome by the barbarian tribes of the north. Having lost political standing through Constantine's establishment of his capitol at Constantinople and losing control over its culture as a result of the barbarian invasion, Rome's artistic style necessarily gave place to an emerging Byzantine style.

The Byzantine Period

In its early period Byzantine art was strictly realistic, applying even to figures of the past a documentary exactitude that presented them as contemporary while at the same time, emphasizing luxury, grandeur and splendor. Other conventions of the Byzantine style reflected the exigencies of art on a monumental scale—the use of modest outlines and only the most essential elements to depict the intend-

was a blending of both East and West. In painting it tended to copy Greek forms, but Eastern influence "led to a more decorative, sumptuous art" Beckett, 19.

³⁸ Morey, *Christian Art*, 13. In contrast to the classical Neo-Attic style that copied Greek art, the Alexandrian painting style was characterized by a three-dimensional, realism that conveyed a sense of freedom in the rendering of movement and the posture of human figures. See Rice, 20; Morey, *Early Christian Art*, 38.

³⁹ Grabar, 145.

ed scene. Byzantine basilica art used few gestures, little action, and impassive and fixed expressions on the countenances of its selected figures. These particular features of Byzantine art lent themselves with special grace to the ancient craft of mosaic art, which the Byzantines applied as mural decoration in a remarkable new demonstration of their creativity.⁴⁰

A typical sixth-century mosaic rendering of Christ and the Samaritan woman at the well has been preserved at Ravenna in San Apollinare Nuovo (fig. 3). The Byzantine practice of contemporizing historical figures can be seen in the dress of the woman, which reflects eastern couture of the time rather than making any attempt to portray the native costume of a Samaritan of Jesus' time. The woman's eyes seem watchful, but her facial expression, in typical Byzantine style, is fixed and frontal, revealing nothing of her attitude or demeanor in this encounter.⁴¹ Similar features characterize the later twelfth century mosaic depictions of the Samaritan woman in the Monreale and Venice cycles.⁴²

Bronze reliefs and ivory relief carvings also characterized the Byzantine era of Christian art. However, the very nature of bronze and ivory reliefs with their "frozen" features makes them less useful for determining the emotional responses of their subjects. Thus, the attitude of the Samaritan woman and the nature of her encounter with Christ (figs. 4, 6), cannot be ascertained, but the presence of this scene on such artistic surfaces gives evidence of the importance and positive significance that the medieval church continued to attribute to this event in the life of Christ.

The Late Middle Ages

The Iconoclast Controversy (725-850) interrupted the development of Byzantine art, but when the conflict was over, the Byzantine style re-emerged more vigorous than ever. Whereas the earlier Byzantine art had been concerned to depict historical events in the life of the Church, the re-emergent focus was liturgical and didactic. Decorative elements were chosen with an eye to their symbolical value and artistic presentations focused on Christ as King, on the

⁴⁰ Gillet.

⁴¹ The *Empress Theodora* mosaic in S. Vitale, Ravenna, ca. 547, provides an example of the Byzantine mosaic style.

⁴² Morcy, *Early Christian Art*, 285.

Virgin Mary, and on bishops, doctors, saints and martyrs, rather than on traditional biblical narrative themes.⁴³ During this period, representation of the Samaritan woman scene was largely restricted to Italian locations as the eastern focus was more on icons and architecture. It should be noted, however, that the Byzantine style conquered the West and became somewhat universal at this time so that the mosaics, ivories, illuminations, and so forth that depict the Samaritan woman continue to offer little evidence for the nature of her encounter with Christ.

As the end of the Middle Ages drew near, a new phase in the history of art was set to begin in Italy. Up to the thirteenth century, Christian art had been carefully and rigidly controlled by the Church. Acceptable portrayals of biblical figures and compositions were prescribed so that there was extremely little variation in the programmatic representations of Gospel scenes. Inherited forms and symbolic meaning characterized Christian artistic endeavor. However, in the late thirteenth century, a new movement was beginning in Italy represented most notably by the work of Duccio in Siena and Giotto in Florence.⁴⁴

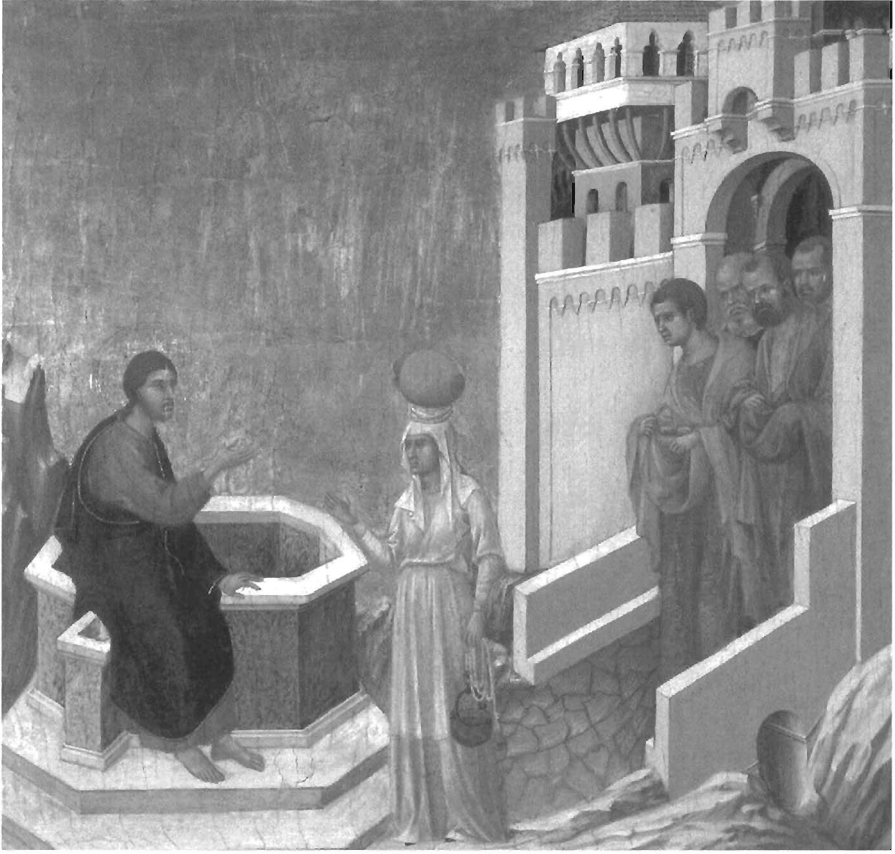
As part of his masterwork, *Maestà*, a multipaneled altarpiece for the Cathedral of Siena, Duccio (ca. 1255-ca. 1318) painted the Samaritan woman scene with a new sensitivity and realism (fig. 12).⁴⁵ While retaining unmistakable elements representative of the conventional Byzantine-medieval style derived from the fifth-century mosaic artists, Duccio injected into his style a new realism and three-dimensional character previously unknown in Siena. Though yet confined by the old traditions and methods, Duccio's *Maestà* gives indication of the changes in artistic style that were about to break free.⁴⁶

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Hayden B. J. Maginnis, *Painting in the Age of Giotto: A Historical Reevaluation* (University Park, PA: Penn State Univ. Press, 1997), while acknowledging the contributions of Duccio and Giotto proposes a reevaluation of the Trecento in central Italy and the place of these two artists within a broader, more diverse artistic milieu. Giuletta Chelazzi Dini, *Sienese Painting from Duccio to the Birth of the Baroque* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1997) and Laura Cavazzini, *Giotto* (Firenze: Giunte, 1998), provide accounts of the traditional perspective on the seminal role of these two artists.

⁴⁵ Beckett, 41.

⁴⁶ Robert Oertel, *Early Italian Painting to 1400* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1966), 196. Cf. Andrea Weber, *Duccio di Buoninsegna* (Köln: Könemann, 1997), 6; Cecilia Jannella, *Duccio di Buoninsegna* (Siena: Scala, 1991), 6.



12. Duccio. *Christ and the Woman of Samaria*. Predella panel. 1311. Fundacion Coleccion Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid, Spain. Credit: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY

The *Maestà* was a “super-altarpiece.” Its central panel presented the enthroned Virgin surrounded by “a court of kneeling and standing saints and angels; above are bust-length figures of prophets in separate panels.”⁴⁷ A set of panels below the Virgin, in a strip later called a predella, displayed illustrations of scenes from the infancy of Christ. Since the altarpiece was freestanding, the back side was also available for displaying other scenes from the life and passion of Christ. Over time the altarpiece and its various panels have been dismantled and many of the predella pieces scattered to public and private collections.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Frederick Hartt, *History of Italian Renaissance Art* (New York: Abrams, 1974), 75.

⁴⁸ Ibid. Cf. Weber, 24-35, for a detailed description of the dismantling and reconstruction of the piece.

Duccio's painting of the Samaritan woman at the well was one of forty-three scenes from the life of Christ that originally appeared on the reverse side of his masterwork, *Maestà*, painted for the Siena Cathedral between 1308 and 1311. These scenes gave an account of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ with special emphasis on his passion. The crucifixion occupied the central position of the four rows of scenes, with post-resurrection appearances filling the space above it. Below the crucifixion scene, two rows presented a variety of scenes from the life of Christ, such as his temptation by Satan, the entry into Jerusalem, the denial by Peter, the trial before Annas, the Samaritan Woman, and so forth.⁴⁹

In comparison with the representational and stylized figures of the Byzantine period, seen in the mosaics and carvings in figs. 3 and 4, Duccio's artistic innovations are readily apparent. Although some Byzantine-like formalism remains, the figures are far more realistic, the gestures and expressions more natural, and the bodies beneath the clothing more substantive. Clearly, the artistic style has not yet achieved the full extent of realism and naturalism that will characterize the later Renaissance period—the figure of Jesus still perches unnaturally on the wellhead in a semi-sitting position and his clothing folds remain flat and frozen—but there is much more conformity to real life than has appeared in any of the earlier illustrations.

Characteristically, Duccio's scenes always had a focal point, usually Christ and/or some other principal figure. These focal figures tend to be primary in Duccio's compositions and they possess an inherent significance that conveys both intellectual content and action. Duccio's method enabled him to incorporate realistic observation with elements of mystery. His "narrative scenes are full of life, often passionate in expression, and suffused with sensitive, human feeling."⁵⁰ Weber considers him to be "a brilliant and skillful narrative painter, who could combine traditional forms with a keen and inventive vision."⁵¹

Perhaps because of Duccio's appeal to the viewer's emotions, for the first time in any of the illustrations of this scene, we are able to analyze something of the nature of this encounter from the postures, gestures, and expressions of the figures. The woman appears to be

⁴⁹ Oertel, 198.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 200.

⁵¹ Weber, 95.

properly respectful, she is decently clothed, with no suggestive baring of seductive flesh, and her hand gesture indicates interested involvement in the conversation. Jesus' hand gesture matches hers and his gaze is direct, his expression serious. The facial expressions and posture of the disciples are especially revealing, reflecting their confusion and hesitation as they see Jesus involved in conversation with the woman. True to his style, Duccio's figures of the Samaritan Woman and Christ provide the focal point in the painting. The medieval-style walled city and the cluster of disciples are secondary background to the main narrative event, as they should be.

Duccio's representation of the John 4 scene is the only available illustration from the Italian Trecento, this transitional period in Christian art. This period forms a bridge between the hieratic, "frozen" style of Byzantine painting and the natural and realistic art style of the Renaissance. It is an important work artistically for that reason and it is significant theologically that there is at this point no indication of ascribing to the Samaritan woman improper behavior or attitudes. Based on the evidence of this painting, it seems fair to conclude that here, early in the fourteenth century, the Church's attitude toward the Samaritan woman encounter is still quite positive. Indeed, apart from the painting's content, we can again draw inferences from the inclusion of this scene in the collection of scenes represented. Since the medium is an altarpiece to be displayed in a prominent place in the Cathedral, and since this scene keeps company with other scenes such as the raising of Lazarus, the women at the sepulcher, and so forth., it seems likely the scene and the woman in it are still receiving the approbation of the Church.

While Duccio was painting in Siena essentially a softened and innovative Byzantine style, Giotto (1266-67/76 - 1337), in Florence, was introducing a completely new style. In his painting, art went from being intellectual and theological to becoming democratic and popular. Whereas Byzantine and early medieval art had portrayed biblical events for the sake of dogmatic instruction, the result of Giotto's new style was an effort by painters to portray the realism and emotion of these scenes.⁵²

Artists began to use their imagination to formulate scenes from the life and sufferings of Christ while enriching old, familiar scenes

⁵² Cf. Luciano Bellosi, *Giotto: Complete Works* (New York: Scala/Riverside, 1981); and Andrew Ladis, ed. *Giotto: Master Painter and Architect* (New York: Garland, 1998), for comprehensive accounts of Giotto's work and influence.

with new features and emotion. Artistic figures began to show softened gestures and tender, human expression. The traditional symbolism and didacticism disappeared as artists rejected any object but the realistic depiction of life in its natural and human dimensions.⁵³ Familiarity and warmth, intended to reach the observer's emotions, replaced the impersonal, stylized representations of the earlier works. There was a sense that "art transforms through devotion and the belief that all beautiful things were eloquent of the divine order. Faces and figures have a human grace and sweetness . . ."⁵⁴ Although there are no known paintings of Christ and the Samaritan woman among the biblical subjects depicted by Giotto, his painting style set the tone for the great Renaissance paintings that followed.⁵⁵

THE RENAISSANCE AND THE REFORMATION

This popular, expressive style of art, initiated by Giotto, was more suited to the plasticity and animation of *fresco*, and it began to supplant the more staid and fixed mosaics. The technique of *fresco*, painting on wet plaster, lent itself more readily to the sentimentality and spontaneity of the artist. With this new movement in art, we can begin to trace in the artistic composition itself, the artist's conception of Christ's encounter with the Samaritan woman, and thereby gain a window on the Church's prevailing attitude toward her.

The Sixteenth Century

Among the earliest known Renaissance paintings of Christ and the Samaritan woman is a painting by Filippino Lippi (1457-1504), dated ca. 1500.⁵⁶ This Lippi painting (fig. 13), is part of a double

⁵³ Timothy Verden and John Henderson, eds. *Christianity and the Renaissance: Image and Religious Imagination in the Quattrocento* (Syracuse: Syracuse Univ. Press, 1990), 10.

⁵⁴ Katharine Morrison McClinton, *Christian Church Art Through the Ages* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 73. Cf. E. H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art*, 4th ed. rev. (New York: Phaidon; distributed by Oxford Univ. Press, 1951), 144-147.

⁵⁵ Hartt, 51-52.

⁵⁶ Alfred Scharf, *Filippino Lippi* (Vienna: Anton Schroll, 1950), 56. Katharine B. Neilson, *Filippino Lippi* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1938), 150, prefers a date before 1498. Luciano Berti and Umberto Baldini, *Filippino Lippi* (Firenze: Edizione D'Arte Il Fiorino, 1991), 211, doubt that it could be earlier than 1497.

panel, and bears a Latin inscription to caption the event.⁵⁷ The other painting represents Jesus' resurrection encounter with Mary Magdalene in the garden, the *Noli Me Tangere*.⁵⁸ In this painting of Christ and the Samaritan Woman there is now sufficient gesture, costume and expression to draw inferences about the artist's conceptualization of the Church's attitude toward the Samaritan woman event.

Both the figures of Christ and of the Samaritan woman are generously clothed, although the woman's garment has the appearance of a diaphanous material as it clings to her legs, revealing her feminine form. Katharine Neilson calls the woman's costume "fussy," a stylistic feature of Lippi's painting at the end of the century.⁵⁹ Her flesh, however, is completely covered and her manner of dress and her hair style are not suggestive. Her hair is neatly coiffed in a sedate, matronly style. Her face is young and her expression attentive as she listens to the speaking of Jesus. The proximity of the figures is close enough to convey the intimacy of conversation, but not so close as to suggest any impropriety.

Jesus' expression is intent and he leans toward the woman with his left hand extended in an open-handed gesture of offering. His right hand holds his outer garment against his chest. Apart from the clinging of her garment to a shapely leg, there is no hint whatsoever in this painting of the Samaritan woman as a seductress or immoral person. In overall impression, the painting portrays the Samaritan woman simply as an intent and interested participant in a serious and vital conversation.

An early sixteenth century painting (fig. 14) by Lorenzo di Credi (1458/9-1537) fits stylistically into a similar format with Filippino Lippi's painting.⁶⁰ Again both Jesus and the Samaritan woman are

⁵⁷ The Latin inscription captures significant words from both figures in the scene and reads, "Si scires donum dei; da mihi hanc aquam" (If you knew the gift of God; give me this water).

⁵⁸ Neilson (150, n. 31) proposes that the subjects of the diptych (or possibly triptych, with the central panel missing) suggest that the work was ordered by a woman.

⁵⁹ Neilson, 150.

⁶⁰ While the scene depicted in this painting is manifestly reminiscent of Christ and the Samaritan woman, it is titled, *The Magdalene at the Feet of the Redeemer*. This title apparently reflects the medieval tendency to identify the Samaritan woman with Mary Magdalene based on the assumption of "a common history of promiscuity and a conversion experience from which follows a career as a disciple of Jesus." Faye Pauli Whitaker, "Woman at the Well," in David Lyle Jeffrey, *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 845.



13. Filippino Lippi. *Christ and the Samaritan Woman*. Diptych panel. ca. 1500. Seminario Arcivescovile, Venice, Italy. Credit: Alinari/Art Resource, NY



14. Lorenzo di Credi. *Christ and the Samaritan Woman*. Oil painting, 1514. Uffizi, Florence, Italy. Credit: Alinari/Art Resource, NY

amply clothed, and their spatial arrangement indicates conversational intimacy without forwardness. In this painting, dated to 1514, Jesus is sitting on the rim of the wellhead, but interestingly, his hands are depicted in a manner strikingly reminiscent of the Lippi painting—the right held to his chest, the left apparently involved in gesturing with the index finger extended. The face of Christ looks weary with the eyelids all but closed as his head leans toward the woman who is kneeling on the ground. The weariness in Christ's face is consistent with the biblical narrative's indication that Jesus had stopped at the well to rest.

The woman's posture, kneeling as she is, gives the impression of a suppliant. Her young, but mature, face is turned upward toward Jesus and her hands are open in a gesture of openness and receptivity. Her expression, as in the Lippi painting, is intent and respectful.⁶¹ There is no sign of the disciples and the town is depicted as a battlemented fortress in the background. As in the Lippi painting, nothing here points toward any seductiveness or moral laxness in the woman. Rather she is portrayed as a humble recipient of Jesus' teaching, interested and attentive.

Another early sixteenth century painting by the German painter, Jan Joest Von Kalkar (1455-60; d. 1519), gives evidence that not only in Italy was the Samaritan woman viewed in a positive light.⁶² This painting of Christ and the Samaritan woman was one of twenty panels of the *Life of Christ* Joest painted on the shutters of the high altar of the parish church of St. Nikolai in Kalkar. The panels present "stately biblical figures . . . mixed with animated accessory figures."⁶³

In Jan Joest's painting (fig. 15), completed sometime between 1505-08, Christ sits beside the well while the woman stands in front of it pouring water from the well's bucket into her larger water pot that rests on the ground before her. The spatial arrangement of the two figures is less intimate than in the early sixteenth-century Italian paintings. A group of men, presumably the disciples, is clustered in

⁶¹ Credi's paintings of faces were noted for their sensitivity of expression. Cf. Robert Brewer, *A Study of Lorenzo di Credi* (Firenze: Tipografia Giuntina, 1970), 40, 47-48.

⁶² Bernard Bruce, *The Bible and Its Painters* (New York: Macmillan, 1983), 173-75.

⁶³ Jean M. Caswell, "Joest (von Kalkar) Jan," in *The Dictionary of Art*, ed. Jane Turner (London: Macmillan, 1996), 601. Cf. Marlene B. Kerrigan, "The Kalkar Retable: An Analysis and Reconstruction of its Iconographic Program" (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Oregon, 1996).



15. Jan Joest Von Kalkar. *Christ and the Woman of Samaria*. Altar wing. 1505-08. Kalkar, Germany. Credit: Rheinisches Bildarchiv Köln

the near background observing the interchange between Jesus and the woman while the city gate and wall is pictured in the far background.

The attire of the woman in this painting is decent and matronly and likely represents the clothing of an ordinary female of the time. The collar of her dress appears to have embroidered decoration, and her skirt has some sort of decorative sash. The style of the dress is in no way immodest and the woman's form, defined only vaguely

by the flow and folds of her garment, shows only the normal and expected curvature of the human body. Her facial expression seems almost frozen as she looks toward Jesus. The facial features of both the woman and Jesus are well-detailed, in keeping with Jan Joest's gift for portraiture, but their expressions lack animation and life.⁶⁴ Her eyes offer no seductive invitation, but look toward him essentially free of any vitality except watchful attention.

This painting is notable in that it shows the woman actually pouring water from the well's bucket into her water vessel. The biblical text itself does not indicate whether the woman's water-drawing task was ever completed. By portraying the drawn water and placing the disciples in close proximity, Joest seems to be depicting a moment toward the end of this conversation after Jesus has revealed his identity to her. At that point in the encounter, the woman was clearly impressed by Jesus, whatever her initial reaction may have been. Her expression, therefore, is understandably respectful. The modest nature of her clothing, however, signifies a person of circumspection rather than a sensual temptress and is not dependent upon the chronology of the discussion.

Jesus' clothing looks to be of a poorer sort, his garment plain and barren of decoration. His facial expression, like the woman's lacks vivacity and his heavy-lidded eyes seem almost to stare beyond her. His mouth is closed, but his left hand is raised in a gesture of communication while his right hand clutches a fold of his garment across his lap. Once again, there is nothing in the painting to give the impression of the woman as seductive or provocative.

Another early sixteenth century painting of note is that done during the 1520s by the Venetian painter, Vincenzo Catena (1470-80; d. 1531).⁶⁵ Catena's painting (fig. 16) presents Christ and the Sa-

⁶⁴ Gert von der Osten and Horst Vey, *Painting and Sculpture in Germany and the Netherlands 1500-1600* (Middlesex, Eng.: Penguin, 1969), 137.

⁶⁵ Giles Robertson, *Vincenzo Catena* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 1954), 35, questions the attribution of this painting to Catena. He finds that although "certain features, such as the simple, geometric painting of the wellhead and the buckets, suggest his hand, the softness of the modelling in the figures and the type of the **landscape** are not characteristic." He suggests that the painting may have been left **unfinished** at the time of Catena's death and been completed by someone else. Fern Rusk Shapley, *Paintings From the Samuel H. Kress Collection: Italian Schools XV-XVI Century* (London: Phaidon, 1968), 156, however, suggests that "the softness which Robertson notes in the figures and especially the 'insubstantial' character of the landscape may be due to retouching necessitated by losses in the original pigment."



16. Vincenzo Catena. *Christ and the Samaritan Woman*. Oil painting, ca. 1520. Columbia, S.C., Museum of Art. Credit: Collection of the Columbia Museum of Art, Columbia, SC/Gift of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation

maritan woman as the full focus of his work. Although the village is shown in the distant background, his entire painting is a close-up portrait of Christ and the woman; no disciples are included anywhere. Catena presents the two figures on opposite sides of the well, but still manages to portray an intensely absorbing encounter between them.

As in the Credi painting, the woman is kneeling, but here she leans across the rim of the wellhead, intently attending to the speaking Jesus. The flesh of her right arm is exposed as it rests on the edge of the wellhead, but her clothing is ample, fully draped, and gives no hint of her human form beneath it. Her hair is straight and hangs down her back partially exposed from under a bulky head wrapping. Her face is attentive, her facial features finely drawn and realistic in appearance. Her posture and intensity clearly indicate her absorption in what Jesus is saying to her.

The figure of Jesus is far more realistic than in the previous paintings and his posture reflects his own deep involvement in this conversation. He sits on the rim of the wellhead opposite the woman but leaning toward her with his right leg bent at the knee and his right foot braced on the inner edge of the rim. His right hand rests on the opposite side of the rim and his left hand is raised in a gesture of emphasis. His clothing also is bulky, multi-layered, and copious. His face, like the woman's, is attentive and his features and attitude give clear indication of the intensity of his speech and his involvement in the conversation.

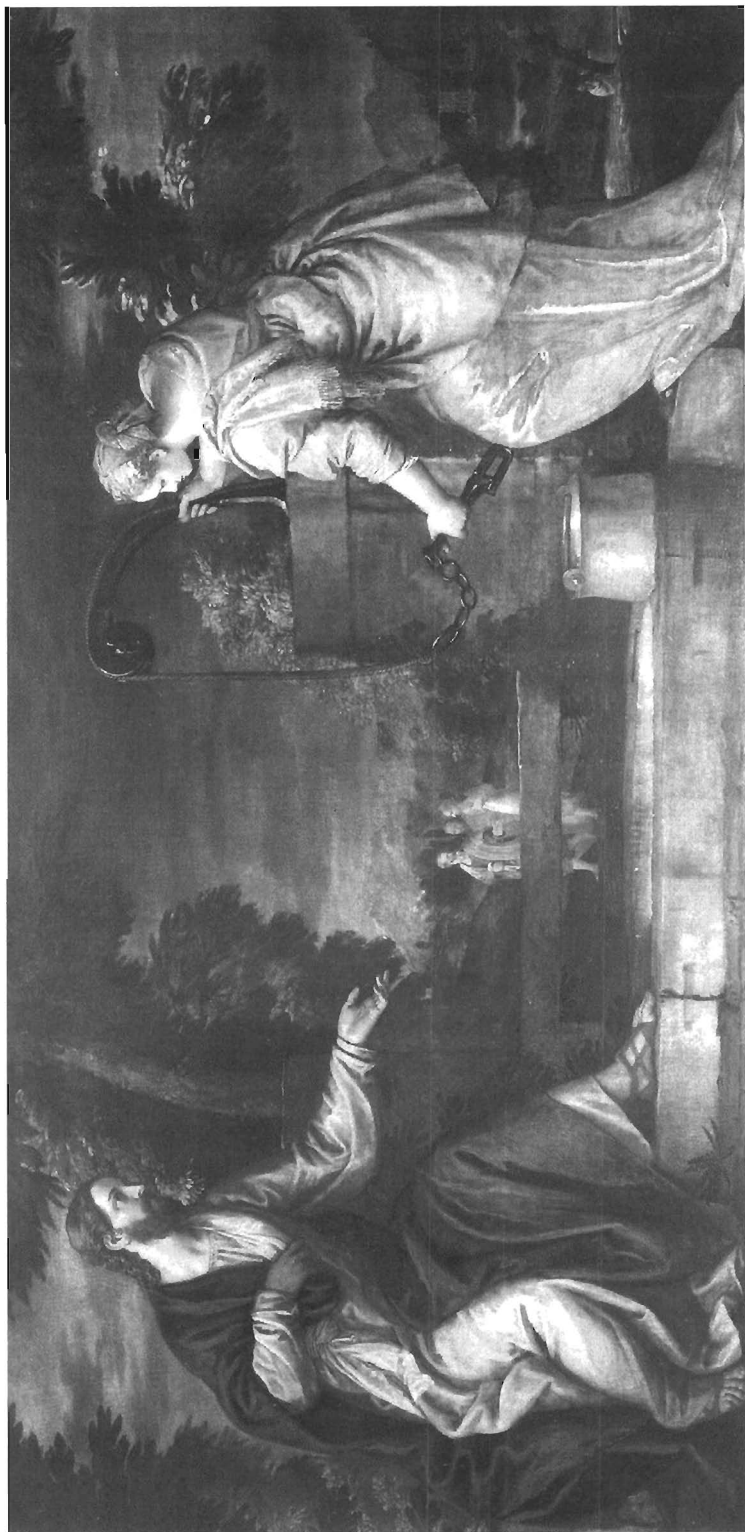
While Jesus' position on the well rim gives a sense of informality to his figure, the obvious intensity of his interest and communication reveal it to be simply another indication of his strong engagement in this event. As with the previous paintings, there is nothing lewd or suggestive in the presentation of the woman in this painting. The impression she gives is of a simple, modest woman eagerly attending to Jesus' life-giving words.

The Italian painter, Paolo Veronese (1528-1588), painted Christ and the Samaritan woman on two different occasions (figs. 17 and 18), and it is interesting to note the similarities and differences in the two paintings. The earlier of the two was painted in 1560 when Veronese had developed his career and become "an established figure on the Venetian scene."⁶⁶ In it Christ and the woman are both

⁶⁶ W. R. Rearick, *The Art of Paolo Veronese, 1528-1588* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1988), 53.



17. Paolo Veronese. *Christ and the Woman of Samaria*. Oil painting. 1560. St. Louis, City Art Museum. Credit: The Saint Louis Art Museum



18. Paolo Veronese. *Christ and the Samaritan Woman*. Oil painting. 1580-82. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum. Credit: Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

portrayed in the foreground, though on opposite sides of the well. In the presentation of the woman, there are for the first time in the paintings reviewed here, indications that she might at least be something of a coquette, if not a morally loose woman.

The sixteenth century was a time of great change in European culture. The effects of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation restricted art in some ways, but liberated it in others. The Protestants often destroyed religious art, considering it to be idolatrous. The Roman Catholics, though carefully regulating the artistic depictions of religious subjects, recognized the value of art as a propaganda tool and encouraged artistic creativity. Artists came to be recognized as “divinely inspired creative geniuses,” able to express through painting, sculpture, and architecture just as much “as the poet could with words or the musician through melody.”⁶⁷ Perhaps this new appreciation for the artist’s “divine inspiration” led Veronese to feel more freedom in his creative endeavors. He was known to be somewhat defiant toward the Catholic Church’s regulation of art based on his response to the Inquisition’s examination of his *Feast in the House of Levi*.⁶⁸

In the earlier Veronese painting of Christ and the Samaritan woman, the woman’s face is young with an expression that might be interpreted as annoyance or irritation. She stands frontally, yet turned just enough toward Christ to indicate her attention to him. Her hair is pulled back from her face and gathered in a decorative roll at the crown of her head and graced with a free-flowing ribbon. Her manner of dress is particularly revealing. The neckline of her garment is cut quite low and her bosom, bulging slightly upward from the edge of the garment’s neck, gives indication of immodest invitation. The sleeves of her dress are rolled up revealing the flesh of both forearms, and a braclet adorns her left arm. The garments themselves have a rich and festive look to them. The woman’s left hand clasps a fold of her outer garment, but the garment itself is bulky with many folds and reveals nothing of her form beneath it. Her bucket rests on the edge of the wellhead and her right hand

⁶⁷ Marilyn Stokstad, *Art History*, rev. ed., Vol. 2 (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995), 681-83. Cf. Sonia Holden Evers, “The Art of Paolo Veronese: Artistic Identity in Harmony with Patrician Ideology” (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of California, Berkeley, 1994).

⁶⁸ Stokstad, 680. Cf. Antonio Vinciguerra, *The Life and Art of Paolo Veronese* (Albuquerque, NM: Gloucester Art Press, 1986), 43-52.

rests somewhat daintily on the edge of the well. Her posture clearly portrays her as engaged with Jesus, the task of drawing water momentarily forgotten.

The Christ figure in this painting is entirely respectable, in clothing and in manner. He sits beside the well with his lower body turned away from it and only his torso and head facing the woman across the well. His clothing is traditional—a long, flowing, primary garment with an outer robe. His left arm rests on the side of the well while his right arm and hand are gesturing indicative of his conversation with the woman. His facial expression is unrevealing. He looks toward the woman, but his expression is difficult to interpret. His gaze appears to be intent and his overall facial appearance is non-threatening, and could perhaps be interpreted as kindly, but it is not distinctively so.

Three figures in the background may be intended to represent the disciples and they stand near some trees that form the primary backdrop for the well scene. The general impression of the setting is of an oasis with the well set in a grove of trees.

As indicated in the earlier discussion of Veronese's treatment of the woman, in this painting the character of the woman is definitely presented in such a way as to make her motives and experiences questionable. Coming as it does toward the end of the sixteenth century, it may well be that Veronese is capitalizing on the artistic freedom permitted to artists as a result of the new appreciation for their divinely inspired creative genius that emerged in the aftermath of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation.

Veronese's other painting of Christ and the Samaritan woman (ca. 1580-82), painted near the end of his life, exhibits a somewhat similar, yet different presentation of this scene (fig. 18). The background and setting for this painting are reminiscent of the earlier one except the vegetation is more dense. Again the well is shown surrounded by trees and three indeterminate figures in the background likely represent the returning disciples. Interestingly, Veronese has used the landscape background to suggest "the onset of nightfall," even though John's Gospel records the event as taking place near noontime (John 4:6).⁶⁹ As in the earlier painting, Christ

⁶⁹ Anna and Rodolfo Pallucchini, "Italy," in *Art History Museum: Vienna Picture Gallery* (New York: Newsweek, 1978), 77. According to Hartt, 562, Veronese was known to claim that a certain license was understood to be the legitimate tool of "painters, poets, and madmen."

and the woman are portrayed on opposite sides of the well, but there are some distinctive differences in the way they are pictured.

In this painting, the woman's left side and back are visible to the viewer as she is depicted in the act of operating a pulley-type of water-drawing mechanism. Her right hand holds to a metal arm supporting the pulley while her left hand grasps a large heavy metal chain that apparently is to be attached to her bucket that sits on the rim of the wellhead. She is presented as a large, strong woman—indeed the water-drawing apparatus pictured would require a person of size and strength to operate it. Nevertheless, her attire appears to be consistent with that presented in the earlier painting. While the front neckline and bosom are not in view, the back neckline of her garment drops down away from her neck in a style that would be consistent with the low-cut, revealing bodice of her dress in the former painting. The sleeves of her garment are pushed up revealing the flesh of her forearms, just as in the earlier painting, although this one lacks the bracelet. Her clothing is similarly ample with many folds, although in this painting, the form of her thigh is evident as she bends her leg to the task. Her hair, as in the earlier painting, is pulled back from her face into a curled mass tied with a decorative fabric. Because her face is visible only in profile, it is difficult to ascertain her expression, but she does appear to be looking intently at Jesus as she works at her water drawing.

The figure of Christ in this painting is turned slightly to face the woman, but the front of his body is almost entirely visible. Again he sits, apparently on a stone bench beside the well. His left foot is placed on the rim of the wellhead while the right foot rests on the ground. His garments mold to the natural outline of his human form so that his right leg is clearly evident by the flow of his skirt. His right hand appears to be grasping the edge of his colored outer garment while his left is outstretched toward the woman in an openhanded gesture of offering something or making entreaty. His expression is difficult to determine as his head is depicted mostly in profile. His gaze appears to be fixed intently on the woman and the overall impression of his face is kind and gentle.

Taken by itself, without reference to the earlier painting, this portrayal of the Samaritan woman has few indications of immoral character. Apart from the exposed flesh of her forearms and the flesh of her neck and upper back revealed by the low-cut neckline of her dress, there is nothing else of a suggestive nature in the painting.

Characteristic of Veronese's style, both figures are "distinguished by their dignified stance."⁷⁰ From this painting alone it is impossible to tell if Veronese was merely portraying the woman in a typical costume of his day or whether he was intending a semi-veiled statement about her perceived character.

In the aftermath of the Council of Trent, the Catholic Church's attempt to reform itself, religious painting underwent a notable change. The final session of the Council, held in December 1563, issued instructions concerning the legitimate use of religious images. The Council affirmed the value of visual representations for instructing people in the faith and for cultivating and nurturing their piety and love for God. At the same time, it expressed concern about indecency in the painting of religious subjects, which led to the promulgation of numerous admonitions against "iconographical license."⁷¹

The Church's concern was that religious works should be orthodox and decorous, while at the same time, being easily understandable, believable, and capable of reaching people's wills and emotions. It wanted works of art that could educate and inspire faithfulness. The prevailing Central Italian Mannerist style was far too sophisticated, formal and intellectual to meet these requirements of the Church, so a new style was needed that would satisfy the Church's concerns.⁷²

Such a new style evolved in the paintings of the three Carracci: Ludovico (1555-1619) and his cousins, Annibale (1560-1609) and Agostino (1557-1602). In the early 1580s they established an academy in Bologna where they not only developed and refined their own style, but through their teaching and influence on their students, they set the dominant Italian painting style for the next sixty years—that which we know today as "Baroque."⁷³ According to Posner,

it is impossible to say how much influence Counter-Reformation ideas had on the development of Annibale Carracci's style. For him, ecclesiastical condemnation of Mannerist art would have merged with his own dissatisfaction, on purely aesthetic grounds, with Central Italian

⁷⁰ F. M. Godfrey, *History of Italian Painting 1250-1800*. Pt. Two, *Italian Painting 1500-1800*, 2nd ed. (New York: Taplinger, 1965), 333.

⁷¹ Donald Posner, *Annibale Carracci: A Study in the Reform of Italian Painting Around 1590* (London: Phaidon, 1971), 35.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ *The Age of Correggio and the Carracci: Emilian Painting of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1986), 237. Cf. John Shearman, *Mannerism* (Middlesex, Eng.: Penguin, 1967).

formalism. . . . In any event, in his choice and presentation of religious subject-matter in his early period, Annibale seems to have been notably responsive to the reformatory temper of the time.⁷⁴

Annibale Carracci actually produced three separate paintings of Christ and the Samaritan woman across the span of a decade or so. The first, which is usually dated ca. 1593/4 (fig. 19), was apparently painted in Bologna shortly before Annibale's move to Rome around 1595.⁷⁵ The second painting included here (fig. 20), dated ca. 1604/1605 is quite different from the first, perhaps because of the difference in his sources.⁷⁶ The third of Annibale's paintings of Christ and the Samaritan woman is a variant replica of the first, painted around 1597, and is not considered here.

Annibale's earliest painting of this subject was made as an over-door for the Sampiere Palace in Bologna. It forms part of a group of three overdoors painted for the palace, one by each of the Carracci. The other two overdoors depicted *Christ and the Adulteress*, painted by Agostino, and *Christ and the Canaanite Woman*, by Ludovico. Apparently Annibale's painting of *Christ and the Samaritan Woman* was based on a preliminary drawing made by Ludovico before each picture was definitively assigned.⁷⁷

In the first of Annibale Carracci's paintings (fig. 19), the Samaritan woman is placed in the center front of the painting. She stands directly in front of the well, frontal to the viewer, although her head is turned left toward Jesus who sits in a casual posture at the right side of the well. Immediately behind the woman, at the back of the well and around to the left side are the figures of five men, presumably representing the disciples. The one in the forefront, directly

⁷⁴ Posner, I:39.

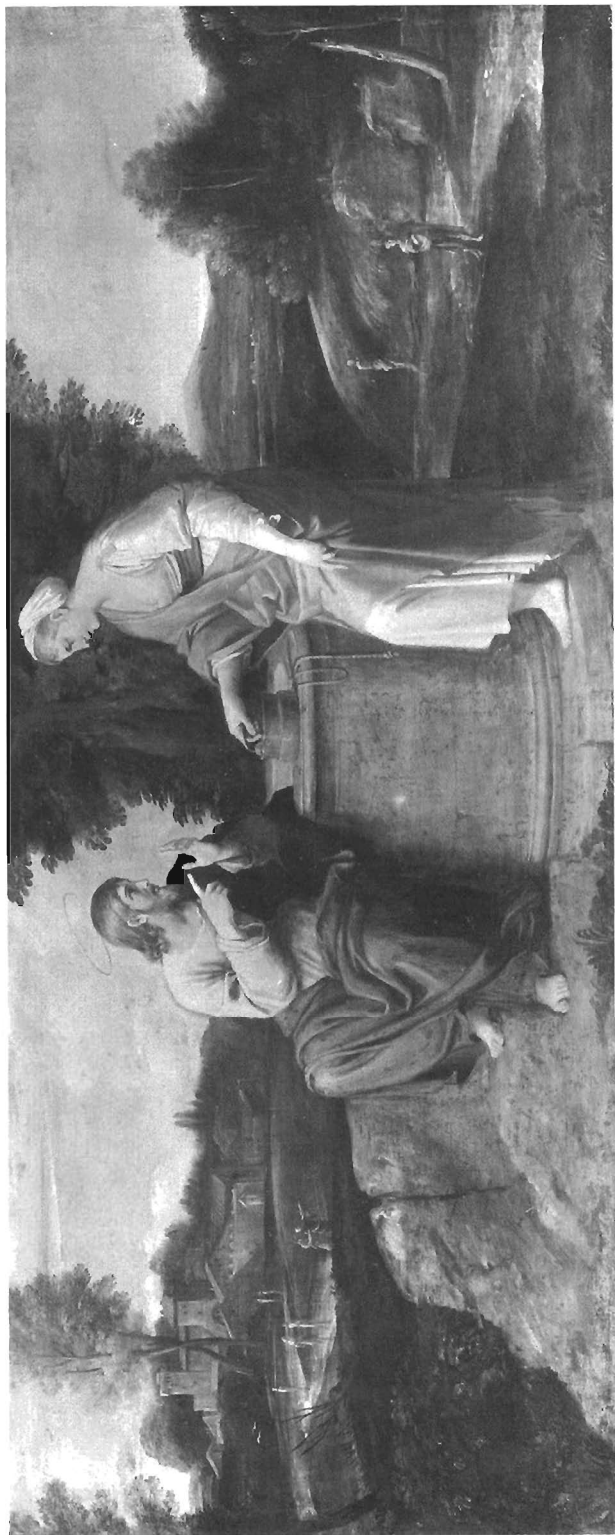
⁷⁵ Posner, II: 33.

⁷⁶ According to Posner, II: 33, in the first painting Annibale apparently made use of a composition study by his cousin, Ludovico, although he greatly altered and elaborated the design. Diane DeGrazio Bohlin, *Prints and Related Drawings by the Carracci Family* (Washington, D. C.: The National Gallery, 1979), 100-103, indicates that the second painting was influenced by an engraving of the same subject executed by his brother, Agostino. Around 1580, Agostino copied in reverse a 1568 print of *Christ and the Samaritan Woman* by Cornelius Cort. Agostino retained the general composition but made several changes from the original giving the figures "more depth and plasticity"(100). This copy became the source for a 1580 signed and dated nonreproductive print by Agostino. Annibale's painting of ca. 1604/05 appears to have copied the figure of Christ from this print and imitated generally its compositional features.

⁷⁷ Posner, II: 33.



19. Annibale Carracci. *Christ and the Samaritan Woman at the Well*. Oil painting, 1593/94. Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan, Italy. Credit: Alinari/Art Resource, NY



20. Annibale Carracci. *Christ and the Samaritan Woman*. Oil painting. 1604-05. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum. Credit: Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

beside the well on the left and at the woman's back, carries food-stuffs in the apron formed by holding up his outer garment.

The woman's figure is well-concealed by her copious garments, although the neckline of her dress is low-cut and reveals significant flesh of her neck, throat, and right shoulder. While her breasts are not exposed, the wrapping of her outer garment drapes across her bosom at the exact location of the cleavage between her breasts and continues across to her forearm, outlining perfectly the curve of her right breast beneath her garment. The right hand and forearm are exposed and the right hand is open and the fingers extended as if in some conversational gesture, perhaps a gesture of dismissal. Her left hand clutches her outer garment and holds it to her body. Her hair is pulled back from her face and mostly covered by a cloth cap or draping; it appears to be utilitarian rather than decorative. Her figure is full-bodied and the curve of her shoulder and the flesh of her neck suggest a voluptuous form. As her face is presented in profile, turned to her left, her expression is unreadable. Her eyes appear to be downcast and there is no sign of smirking or scorning in the set of her mouth.

The distance between Jesus and the woman is appropriate to a casual encounter and conversation. Her water jar sits between them on a ledge that surrounds the well. The figure of Jesus, seated at the right of the well is relaxed, almost reclining, with his right elbow resting on the rim of the wellhead. His garments are similar to those in all the other paintings—a plain white main garment, ankle-length, with a colored outer garment draped as a loose overwrap. His feet rest on rocks at different heights so that his legs are spread in an open, casual manner. His right hand touches his chest with fingers extended. His left arm and hand are raised with the index finger pointing into the distance to his left, presumably toward Mount Gerizim, which was the subject of the woman's question concerning the proper place of worship. The expression on Jesus' face is kind and gentle as he looks directly at the Samaritan woman. His attention is intently focused upon her and he appears to be watching her for a response.

The proximity of the disciples and the woman's orientation in relation to Jesus suggest that Carracci intended to portray that moment toward the conclusion of the encounter when the returning disciples precipitated the woman's departure. Her water jar is left sitting on a ledge at the base of the wellhead and the lines of her

figure indicate that she is moving away from Jesus and the well, presumably on her way back to the village to give her witness.

Apart from the possibility that the woman's clothing is intended to be morally suggestive, there is nothing in this painting to portray her as anything other than a simple woman caught up in the unexpected conversation with Jesus. Quite probably because Carracci was painting in Italy and under the oversight of the Catholic Church, his painting of the Samaritan woman was unaffected by the Reformers' changing perception of her.

The second of Carracci's paintings of Christ and the Samaritan woman (fig. 20) is a quite different piece altogether. In this painting, the woman stands at the right of the well facing Jesus who sits on the left. The woman's left foot rests on a ledge at the base of the well and the folds of her garment slightly reveal the outline of her leg. This woman appears taller than the woman in the other paintings and she is somewhat leaner and less voluptuous in her form. The neckline of her dress is low-cut and reveals a hint of bosom, even though her overall appearance does not convey a coquettish or flirtatious demeanor. Her hair, as in the other paintings, is pulled back from her face and topped by a cloth cap or covering that seems more utilitarian than decorative. Her face in profile is unreadable though her eyes appear to be downcast. Her expression at most seems thoughtful. Her right hand holds her vessel which is suspended in the well and her left hand holds to her garment at her left side.

The figure of Jesus in this painting is more intense. He is seated as in the other paintings, but his form is tensed as if for action rather than relaxed. He appears to be actively engaged in speaking to the woman and his face is purposeful and intent. Both arms are raised in gesture, with the right forefinger extended as if making a dramatic point. This Jesus is involved in serious teaching.

As in the other Carracci painting, there is no evidence of the woman's immorality unless it be deduced from the cut of her clothing. Nothing in her demeanor, posture, or expression would support an understanding of her as an outcast. As depicted in this painting, the Samaritan woman is simply a person in need of the good news Jesus has to share and he speaks intensely to convince her to accept the gift of living water. She is no more sinner than any other person who has not yet received the gift of salvation that Jesus came to bring.

The Seventeenth Century

Outside of Italy, the aftermath of the Reformation that saw the development of Protestantism affected somewhat the depiction of biblical events in paintings. The concern about idol worship brought about a reaction against the practice of decorating churches and chapels with works of art and many artists turned to portraiture, landscape painting, still-lives, and scenes from everyday life for their subjects.⁷⁸ Some artists continued to paint biblical scenes, but embellished them with increasingly popular landscapes and daily life settings. One master of such integration who made a frequent subject of his art the encounter between Christ and the Samaritan woman was Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669).⁷⁹

Among Rembrandt's various works that featured Christ and the Samaritan woman are three paintings from the decade of the 1650's that illustrate this scene in his distinctive Venetian style.⁸⁰ All three, bearing the title "Christ and the Woman of Samaria" are signed and dated by Rembrandt, one in 1655 and the other two in 1659 (figs. 21-23).⁸¹

In the 1655 work (fig. 21), Rembrandt places the figure of Jesus in shadow and the woman is backgrounded with light. The setting looks like an enclosed shelter in which the well is placed. The well-head occupies the full right lower half of the picture and Jesus' body, standing or sitting at the right of the well, is lost in the dark rectangle of the wellhead. His left hand appears at the rim of the well in a gesture of communication and his face, though shadowy, appears to be kindly and expectant as he speaks to the woman.

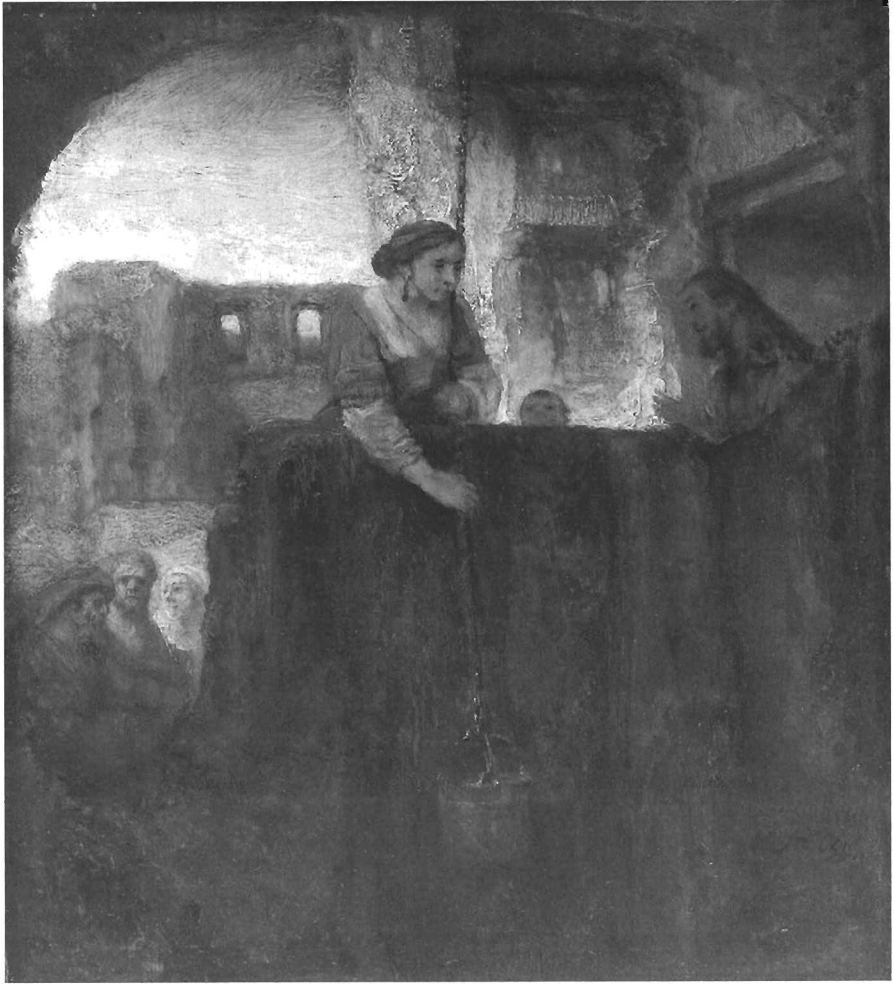
The figure of the woman stands to the left and behind the well-head, facing Jesus and turned about three-quarters frontal to the viewer. Her right hand holds a chain rope attached to a bucket that

⁷⁸ A. D. Wright, *The Counter-Reformation: Catholic Europe and the Non-Christian World* (New York: St. Martin's, 1982), 230. Cf. Jones, 102-103.

⁷⁹ Julius Samuel Held, *Rembrandt Studies*, rev. and expanded ed. (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1991).

⁸⁰ "The subject [Christ and the woman of Samaria at the well] appears repeatedly in Rembrandt's works of the 1650s, also in drawings and etchings, with a strong Venetian flavour." Abraham Bredius, *Rembrandt: The Complete Edition of the Paintings*, rev. by H. Gerson (London: Phaidon, 1969), 610.

⁸¹ Gary Schwartz, *Rembrandt: His Life, His Paintings: A New Biography with all Accessible Paintings Illustrated in Color* (New York: Viking Press, 1985), 322, notes that Rembrandt also made an etching of Christ and the Samaritan woman in 1658, but confesses that "The relevance of the theme in these years is unknown to me."



21. Rembrandt van Rijn. *Christ and the Woman of Samaria at the Well*. Oil painting, 1655. Berlin-Dahlem, Gemäldegalerie. Credit: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin-Preußischer Kulturbesitz Gemäldegalerie/Fotonachweis: Jörg P. Anders

dangles in front of the well and her left hand appears to grasp the same chain at the rim of the wellhead. Her clothing completely covers her body and there are white sleeves on the lower part of her arms and a white collar to contrast with the otherwise dark color of her dress. Her hair is neatly coiffed and fastened around her head and she appears to be wearing a long, dangling earring in her right ear. Her facial expression is indistinct, but gives the impression of attentive listening as she looks toward Jesus.

Behind the woman and on lower ground are the heads of three men, apparently representing the disciples. Farther behind them is



22. Rembrandt van Rijn. *Christ and the Woman of Samaria at the Well*. Oil painting. 1655/59. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Credit: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Bequest of Lillian S. Timken, 1959 (60.71.14)



23. Rembrandt van Rijn. *Christ and the Woman of Samaria*. Oil painting. 1659. Hermitage, St. Petersburg, Russia. Credit: Scala/Art Resource, NY

an indistinct wall with two light portals, giving the impression that the woman is inside an enclosure rather than outside. Another unique feature of this painting is the head of a child peering over the rim of the well between the woman and Jesus. Unless the child is intended to represent her as a mother and thus point to her marital status, there is nothing else in the painting to cast aspersions on her character.

The date of the second Rembrandt painting (fig. 22) is uncertain. Gerson (1969), in his revision of Bredius, indicates that it is signed by Rembrandt *f.* 1655;⁸² Schwartz (1985) indicates that it is signed by Rembrandt, *f.* 1659.⁸³ The composition of this painting is quite different from the previous one. Rembrandt has portrayed the scene against an impressive landscape background. Christ, the well and the woman occupy the bottom half of the picture, but the upper half is filled with a towered city wall upon a rugged hilly backdrop with verdant trees occupying the middle portion. Using his expertise for manipulating light and darkness, the figure of the woman is illuminated while the Christ figure is more shadowed and the landscape background is darker still.⁸⁴ Only the sky above the city wall and trees match the lightness in which the woman is cast.

The woman stands to the right of the well leaning over it toward Jesus who sits at the left of the well. Her left hand resting on the rim of the wellhead braces her as she holds her water vessel on the edge with her right hand. Her clothing is modest and simple with a white blouse-type garment and a darker skirt. The sleeves of her blouse are rolled up to her elbow in the manner of a worker. Her hair is bound upon her head and covered with a cap or cloth. Her face, visible only in profile, conveys an intent and serious expression as she gazes directly at Jesus.

The figure of Christ is seated to the left of the well and is facing frontally with a slight angle of his body away from the woman and the well and toward the city in the background. The position of his body is consistent with the gesture of his right arm, which is out-

⁸² Bredius, 610.

⁸³ Schwartz, 322.

⁸⁴ Bob Haak, *Rembrandt: Life and Work*, trans. Pamela von Nostitz (Woodbury, NY: Barron's, 1981), 69, points out that Rembrandt's post-1650 work is characterized by "strong light contrasts and backgrounds often so dark that it is impossible to distinguish clearly the individual elements in them"

stretched and pointing toward the city. His left hand is shadowed, but appears to be clasping his garment at his left side. His garment is a full-length dress-like robe of a dark color that covers him from the neck and even hides his feet. His expression is animated and eager as he speaks intently to the woman. Behind the figure of Christ, in a valley between him and the rocky mount of the city, there are several male figures, presumably the returning disciples. As with the Italian paintings of this scene, there is nothing in the painting to portray the woman as anything other than an ordinary person in need of the Savior. There is no indication of her immorality.

The third of Rembrandt's paintings of Christ and the Samaritan woman (fig. 23) is also strikingly different from the other two analyzed here. The setting for this painting, dated to 1659, is more formal and stylized than the other two. The well in this picture is located in an open air structure supported by stone or cement columns. Jesus and the Samaritan woman each fill the space of an arched opening between the columns, and though facing each other, are largely frontal to the viewer.

The woman is standing behind and to the right of the well while Jesus is apparently seated behind and to the left of it. The woman's left hand is grasping a bucket attached to a chain and her right hand is clasping the chain at some distance from the bucket. She is dressed quite stylishly for a water-drawing task, with a hat and a necklace of some sort hanging upon her bosom. The neckline of her dress is low-cut, although her bosom is not shown. The sleeves are full and loose, being pushed up or rolled up to the elbow. Her hair is hidden by her hat and her facial expression is nondescript. She does appear to be looking at Jesus and listening politely to what he is saying.

The figure of Christ is obviously speaking and his right hand is outstretched in an entreating gesture. His left arm rests on the ledge of the well shelter. His clothing is simple with a basic shaded garment and a darker outer cloak or wrap. His facial expression is open and direct with a look of appeal as he reaches out to the woman. Behind the woman to the right on a hill in the background are the outlined towers of a town and in the closer foreground behind her to her left is a procession of figures, presumably representing the disciples. As in the other two paintings, nothing in her portrayal suggests a questionable character for the woman.

Another artist of the seventeenth century who produced multiple paintings of Christ and the Samaritan woman was Il Guercino (born Giovanni Francesco Barbieri, 1591-1666).⁸⁵ Two of his paintings are analyzed here, one from ca. 1621, painted in his early pre-Roman manner with naturalistic figures and a romantic feeling (fig. 24). The other is from 1640/41 (fig. 25) when he had returned to Cento from Rome and developed a more classical style with more idealized figures and more defined form and outline.⁸⁶

The earlier Guercino painting (fig. 24) is notable for the spatial closeness of the two figures. In all of the previous paintings, the spacing of the figures was appropriate for conversation between strangers—close enough to enable conversation, but separate enough to respect the individual space. In this early Guercino painting, the two figures are so close as to be almost touching. There is only the smallest space between the right arm of the woman and the left arm of Jesus. Rather than being placed on opposite sides of the well as in the other paintings, both figures here stand or sit in close proximity behind the well. The woman's water bucket sits on the rim of the well with its handle over her left arm and her right hand grasping the rim of the vessel.

The woman's clothing is multi-layered, but the neckline is open exposing the flesh of her neck and shoulder. Guercino has used the technique of *chiaroscuro* effectively here, allowing the use of light to emphasize the whiteness of her flesh. Her sleeves are rolled back just beyond her wrists in the manner of one undertaking a task such as drawing water. Her hair is long and dark, gathered into a mass at the back of her head and tied with a plain ribbon at the nape of her neck. Her face is shadowed but gazes intently at the face of Jesus as she leans slightly toward him. Her posture and expression indicate that she is absorbed and attentive to his words.

⁸⁵ Guercino was known to paint multiple copies of his paintings, sometimes identical, but often with some variation. Richard Spear, "Guercino's 'Prix-Fixe': Observations on Studio Practices and Art Marketing in Emilia," *Burlington Magazine* 136 (Sept. 1994), 594-596. Cf. David M. Stone, *Guercino: Catalogo completo dei dipinti* (Firenze: Cantini, 1991), 184-85.

⁸⁶ This slow change in Guercino's style is fully discussed by Denis Mahon in *Studies in Seicento Art and Theory* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1975). Cf. David M. Stone, "Theory and practice in Seicento art: The example of Guercino" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1989), and Andrea Emiliani, "Guercino: From Natural Talent to the Romanticism of Reality," in Denis Mahon, *Guercino: Master Painter of the Baroque* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1992), 31-38.



24. Guercino. *Christ and the Woman of Samaria*. Oil painting, ca. 1621. Detroit, Institute of Arts. Credit: City of Detroit Purchase. Photograph ©1997 The Detroit Institute of the Arts



25. Guercino. *Christ and the Samaritan Woman at the Well*. Oil painting. 1640-41. Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada. Credit: National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Purchased, 1965

The figure of Christ sits facing the woman and speaking to her. His left hand clasps his outer garment and pulls it toward his body while his right hand is open and extended in a gesture apparently intended to enhance or emphasize his words. His clothing is also multi-layered and is distinctive in this painting by having a decorative edging around the neck and down the front closure. His hair and beard are typical and his expression is peaceful and calm. His eyes, though directed toward the woman, seem to look more inward—as though he is seeing some event or truth beyond the present moment. Again Guercino uses *chiaroscuro* to highlight Jesus' face and the flesh of his chest above his garment.

The two figures of Christ and the Samaritan woman dominate this painting. The well is evident only by its rim serving as a prop for the woman's bucket and as the physical feature drawing the two figures together. The background is insignificant, showing only sky and parts of trees, most at a distance.

Of all the paintings analyzed thus far, this one has the most potential for leading to an interpretation of the Samaritan woman as perhaps impertinent in her response or immoral in her character. While her attitude is attentive and she appears absorbed by his words, her expression is such that it can be perceived as sincere or mocking—as if she has questioned him about the water he promises and is awaiting his response to her implied ridicule. While her garments are copious and the open neckline reveals no sign of her bosom, the exposed flesh emphasized by Guercino's artistic use of light might hint at promiscuity. However, he uses the same technique to highlight the flesh of Jesus' face and the exposed flesh of his chest, so that such an interpretation seems unlikely. As there is no overt and obvious indication of promiscuity, the painting most likely simply reflects the naturalistic and romantic motifs of Guercino's early painting style.⁸⁷

The second painting by Guercino (fig. 25) is quite different in composition and manner from the first. It is also unlike the other paintings of Christ and the Samaritan woman in that it positions the woman actually turning away from Jesus and only looking back over her shoulder in acknowledgment that he is speaking to her. The woman holds her water vessel against her body with both hands,

⁸⁷ Rudolf Wittkower, *Art and Architecture in Italy, 1600-1750* (Middlesex, Eng.: Penguin, 1975), 88.

the left grasping it around the neck and the right hand holding the rope for letting the vessel into the well while supporting the base of the jar. Her body is actually turned away from the well, and Jesus stands behind the well, and consequently, also behind her.

The woman's clothing is comparable to that in the earlier painting. There is a light or white main garment with a rounded, low neckline that reveals her flesh, but not her bosom. A darker outer garment follows the neckline of the other and is tucked into the neckline area above her right breast. The woman's hair is dark and long and flows down her back, held back from her face by the hint of a plain headband. Her face is half-turned and thus half-hidden in shadow, but she is listening to Jesus' words politely. The expression of her face can be read as submissive or as reluctant interest. Her downcast eyes may convey a modest and respectful attitude or they may reflect embarrassment or shame. In any case, they seem to express sadness and sorrow.

Jesus, uncharacteristically, is standing rather than sitting. His outer garment is draped over his left arm and his right arm and hand are raised in a conversational gesture. His right index finger points away behind or beyond him, apparently toward Gerizim, as in the first Carracci painting (fig. 21). His garment is similar to the one in the earlier Guercino painting—dark, copious with a rounded, low neckline edged with a decorative braid. His hair and beard are usual, long and dark. His face in profile as he faces the woman makes his expression unreadable. He does appear to be looking at the woman and expecting a response from her.

As in the earlier Guercino painting, the well itself is not visible, only in this case, a railing around it and the rope for drawing give evidence of its existence. The background again is filled only by clouds and distant trees. The use of light and shadow is evident here though not as vividly used as in the earlier painting. As with the previous painting, there is nothing in this portrayal of the woman to raise questions about her good character or her intentions.

During the Baroque Period (1590-1700), there is an interesting painting of Christ and the Samaritan woman by Philippe de Champaigne (1602-74). Born and trained in Brussels, Champaigne painted professionally in France.⁸⁸ In this painting (fig. 26), the woman is

⁸⁸ Bernard Dorival, *Philippe de Champaigne, 1602-1674: La vie, L'oeuvre, et le Catalogue Raisonné*, 2 vols. (Paris: L. Laget, 1976) is recognized as the definitive work on Champaigne's life and work.



26. Philippe de Champaigne. *Jesus and the Woman of Samaria*. Oil painting, 17th century. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Caen, France. Credit: Giraudon/Art Resource, NY

shown with perhaps more personality than in any others. She stands in front of the well beside which Jesus is sitting, and the moment captured here seems to be the one at the beginning of the encounter where she is responding with surprise, even astonishment that Jesus is speaking to her, a mere woman, and a Samaritan. Her whole posture expresses her amazement as she physically draws back in wonder, extends her left hand in a gesture of surprise and touches her bodice with the right hand as a gesture signifying her incredulity that he is speaking to her.⁸⁹

⁸⁹ Anthony Blunt, *Art and Architecture in France, 1500-1700* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1954), 173-175.

Her dress is modest, well covering her body. The neckline, though low-cut, has an insert to prevent any revealing of her bosom. The flesh of her neck is visible and her right forearm, but in both cases, the shadows mute its effect. Her face, too, is mostly in shadow, but it complements the astonishment evident in her body language. Her face is mature, but not old, and her hair is dark and tied with a scarf at the back of her head. Spatially, she and Jesus are close together, but her expression and his body position preclude any idea of impropriety. The outline of her legs is visible beneath the folds of her outer garment, but in a realistic dimension, not a sensual one.

The figure of Jesus, though seated beside the well, leans dramatically away from the woman, almost as if he is drawing back in response to the intensity of her reaction. His left hand is open, the fingers spread in an outstretched position over the mouth of the well, perhaps signifying his request for some of its water. His right arm is extended almost at a ninety-degree angle and the right index finger points upward. If Champaigne was trying to include all aspects of the encounter in this one painting, perhaps the pointing of Jesus' hands, one toward the well, the other toward heaven, indicates the contrast between the well's water and the "living water" that Jesus has to offer.⁹⁰

The clothing of Christ is consistent with that in the other seventeenth-century paintings. He wears a plain, light-colored, full-length main garment with a colored outer garment cast over his left shoulder and his legs. His facial expression is dignified and serious, befitting the serious subject of their conversation. The background includes a towered city wall in the distance and a cluster of approaching male figures, probably the disciples, on a road that leads from the well to the city. Consistent with most of the other portrayals, absolutely nothing here can be construed as pointing to a dubious character for the woman.

Another distinctive seventeenth-century painting of Christ and the Samaritan woman was painted in 1690 by the French painter, Pierre

⁹⁰ Champaigne was actively engaged with the Jansenists (a group led by the Dutch theologian, Cornelius Jansen, who believed that the theologians of the Counter-Reformation had gone too far in their opposition to Luther and Calvin, thereby emphasizing human responsibility at the expense of divine initiative) and his "monumental, rather severe style" of painting was considered to be "the result of his religious leanings." Olan Alexander Rand, Jr., "Philippe de Champaigne: Studies in Style, Theory and Jansenist Influence" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1965), 1.

Mignard (1612-1695), a contemporary of Philippe de Champaigne.⁹¹ Coming near the end of Mignard's long and distinguished career, primarily as a portrait painter, his depiction of Christ and the Samaritan woman (fig. 27) reflects the skills he had developed in the realistic presentation of the human body and detailed facial features.

Mignard's composition for the painting follows the usual pattern with Christ sitting on the left of the well, the woman standing in front of the well and to the right. She stands with sandaled feet on a stone ledge that encircles the well and leans with her right forearm across the top of her water vessel, which sits on the rim of the wellhead. Her clothing immediately identifies her as a common person as it is plain and unembellished. Her dress is typically generous and multi-layered. The sleeves are pushed up just above the wrist in a manner that evokes her working status and the cut of her bodice is utilitarian and unrevealing. Her hair is dark in color, pulled away from her face and almost completely covered by a cloth wrapped around it. Her posture is casual with her right leg crossed over the left in an attitude of relaxed attentiveness and might be considered a bit suggestive. Her facial expression, seen only in profile, seems young, ingenuous, and respectful.

Jesus sits beside the well, his left elbow resting on the rim of the well while his left hand is open and gesturing. His right arm, in a manner reminiscent of Champaigne's painting (fig. 26) and Guercino's second painting (fig. 25), is upheld at a ninety degree angle as his right index finger points toward heaven. His clothing follows the pattern of the other painters: a light colored main garment with a darker colored outer garment draped over his left shoulder and across his legs. His facial expression is serious and intent, his gaze fixed expectantly on the woman. The background shows high ridges and copious trees with a walled village on the hill behind Jesus. Between Jesus and the city on a dirt road are the indistinct figures of several men, likely depicting the disciples. There is little in the painting to cause questions about the character of the woman. She is positioned at a respectable distance from Jesus and her facial expression is one of attentive listening to Jesus' words. Her posture, however, may raise a question about her intentions. It could be

⁹¹ Lada Nikolenko, *Pierre Mignard: The Portrait Painter of the Grand Siecle* (Munich: Nitz, 1983), 22-23, compares the portrait style of Mignard and Champaigne. Cf. Blunt, 244-45.



27. Pierre Mignard. *Christ and the Woman of Samaria*. Oil painting, 1690. Louvre, Paris, France. Credit: ©Photo RMN - R. G. Ojeda

interpreted as somewhat enticing. Otherwise, she appears to be a properly behaved and polite conversation partner.

THE MODERN ERA

With the arrival of the eighteenth century there was a noticeable decline in religious art due to a number of circumstances: the Enlightenment intellectualism that resulted in a general diminishment in the Church's authority,⁹² the industrial revolution that severely curtailed the patronage system, and new currents in art that favored portraiture, landscapes, still-lives, and so forth.⁹³ Additionally, the artistic center of gravity had shifted from Italy, Spain, and the Netherlands to England and France.⁹⁴ The dearth of religious art during this period is reflected in the few examples of Christ and the Samaritan woman considered here.

The Eighteenth Century

A notable artist who painted many different versions of the encounter between Christ and the Samaritan woman during the early eighteenth century was Sebastiano Ricci (1659-1734).⁹⁵ The two paintings by Ricci that are analyzed here are unique among all that have been considered thus far in that the detailing of the woman in each of these depictions (figs. 28-29) gives clear indication of her assumed loose morality.

The first of these paintings (fig. 28), completed ca. 1718, shows a square stone wellhead with Jesus seated on its left side and the woman leaning on its right side from a standing position. Her clothing, though typically copious, hangs loosely on her body so that the flesh of her right breast and shoulder are exposed as she leans toward Jesus and braces herself with her right hand upon the rim of the wellhead. Both of her arms are exposed, the right up to the elbow

⁹² For a cogent summary of these changes see John McManners, "Enlightenment: Secular and Christian (1600-1800)," in *The Oxford History of Christianity*, ed. John McManners (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993), 277-309.

⁹³ Ulrich Im Hof, *The Enlightenment*, trans. William E. Yuill (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 10.

⁹⁴ Stokstad, 929-933.

⁹⁵ *L'opera Completa di Sebastiano Ricci* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1976).



28. Sebastiano Ricci. *Christ and the Samaritan Woman*. Oil painting, ca. 1718. Sheffield, Art Galleries. Credit: Sheffield Galleries and Museums Trust Collection

and the left to well above the elbow as her left hand seems to be holding up her outer garment above her left thigh. By holding up the outer garment, the form of her leg is readily apparent through the folds of her inner garment. The scene implies that she has lifted her skirt in order to kneel on the ledge at her side of the well, comparable to the ledge Jesus is sitting on to the left side of the well, but the effect is to reveal the bodily form of her leg and thigh. Her body overall is big-boned and fleshy.



29. Sebastiano Ricci. *Christ and the Woman of Samaria*. Oil painting. 1720s. London, Hampton Court. Credit: The Royal Collection ©2000, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II

The woman's hair is dark and pulled back from her face, covered with a cap or cloth. Her facial expression conveys interest in what Jesus is saying and looks expectant. She is young and apparently somewhat bold and immodest. Her water vessel rests on the ground in front of the well.

The seated Christ also leans slightly toward the woman. His left forearm and hand rest on the edge of the wellhead while his right arm and hand are raised in a conversational gesture. His clothing, a simple full-length garment covering his entire body, has the customary darker outer garment draped over his left arm and across his legs. He looks intently at the woman with an expression both kindly and expectant. The background is largely trees and clouds.

The rather coarse overall appearance of the woman and her exposed breast and shoulder clearly create in the viewer a negative or at least questioning impression of her moral character. The "hiked up" outer garment that reveals the form of her leg, even though clothed, adds to the sense of the woman's sensuality and questionable morality.

The second painting by Ricci (fig. 29), dated to the 1720s near the end of his life, has certain features in common with the first in terms of how Jesus and the woman are portrayed. A unique feature of this painting, in comparison with the other by Ricci, is that Jesus and the woman are presented as part of a narrative scene, rather than as the sole focus of the painting.

In this painting, as in the other, Jesus sits at the left side of the well turned toward the woman who stands, more frontally, on the right side of the well, but looking at Jesus. The wellhead, uniquely here and in Ricci's first painting, is built up of square stones; in all the other paintings considered, the wellhead is round. The woman's bucket sits on the edge of the wellhead and she leans forward toward Jesus, her right forearm resting across the top of her bucket and her left hand placed beside the bucket to brace herself. Her clothing is copious, but appears thin and worn. The outer portion of her skirt, which she holds up with her hand in Ricci's first painting, is tucked up or tied up near her waist so that the thin and clinging nature of her inner garment allows the hint of her leg's shape to be shown. As in the first picture, the bodice of her garment hangs loosely so that her right breast is exposed. Her hair follows the customary pattern of being combed away from her face, gathered

at the crown of her head and tied with a decorative ribbon or piece of fabric.

The face of Jesus in this painting incorporates features from the previous Ricci painting. His expression lacks the gentle sweetness of the first painting. In this painting, Jesus looks up at the woman with a face that is intent, caring, and exhorting. Both his arms and hands are outstretched in gestures that elaborate his speech. His posture confirms the intensity of his speech as he rests his left foot on a ledge in front of the well, with the right leg and foot tensed slightly behind it on the ground as if he is about to stand.

The background of this painting fills in the narrative. Jesus, the woman, and the well occupy only the lower half of the picture. Above them, on higher ground, are distant images of classical columned buildings, a large tree, and plenteous clouds. Behind the woman are the faint forms of several men (likely the disciples) backgrounded by other classical structures with arches and columns. A dog rests on a step near the well behind the woman's feet.

While it seems appropriate to again read in the woman's attire an indication of her immorality, there may be another explanation. This painting is one of a series of seven New Testament scenes, all but one representing incidents from Christ's ministry, which Ricci painted during the mid 1720s.⁹⁶ Another of these seven depicts Christ with the woman who touched his garment to be healed of her twelve year hemorrhaging (fig. 30). In the biblical text (Matt. 9:20-22), nothing indicates a hint of immorality in the character of this woman; indeed, she is commended for her great faith. Yet, in his painting of this scene, Ricci has portrayed the woman in attire much like that of the Samaritan woman in his third painting. It is possible, therefore, that this type of clothing, for Ricci, symbolizes not moral character, but simply Ricci's style. As a painter during the early eighteenth-century renaissance of Venice as an international city, Ricci had studied widely not only in Italy, but in Rome, London, and Paris. Additionally, his work was modelled largely on Veronese's style so that he likely felt some of Veronese's sense of artistic license and

⁹⁶ Michael Levey, *The Later Italian Pictures in the Collection of Her Majesty the Queen* (London: Phaidon, 1961), 98. The other six paintings in this series are *Christ and the Woman Who Believed* (fig. 35), *The Magdalen Anointing Christ's Feet*, *The Adoration of the Magi*, *The Sermon on the Mount*, *Pool of Bethesda*, and *Woman Taken in Adultery*.



30. Sebastiano Ricci. *Christ and the Woman Who Believed*. Oil painting. 1720s. London, Hampton Court. Credit: The Royal Collection ©2000, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II

freedom from constraint in his artistic works.⁹⁷ It appears that his work reflects the serendipitous convergence of artist and locale and era versus any significant changing theological current. If the clothing is interpreted according to this understanding of Ricci's work, this later painting of the Samaritan woman makes no negative statement about the woman's moral character.

The Nineteenth Century

Toward the middle of the nineteenth century, a new artistic movement arose in England associated with the so-called Oxford Movement in religion, a time of deepening spiritual devotion.⁹⁸ One example of this artistic period that portrays Christ and the Samaritan woman is a painting by William Dyce (1806-1864). Dyce's strong religious convictions are reflected in his painting, which was influenced both by the fifteenth century style of German Nazarenes⁹⁹ and by the English pre-Raphaelite movement in painting.¹⁰⁰

Dyce's painting (fig. 31) "seems to retain something of Nazarene austerity in general conception but also shows the stimulus to the elaboration of natural detail he had gained from . . . the pre-Raphaelite movement."¹⁰¹ The scene projects "the qualities of gentleness and grace with which he [Dyce] could nearly always infuse his work."¹⁰²

In the painting Jesus sits alone, frontally, beside the well, which has only a low, rough stone wellhead. Jesus sits, apparently deep in thought, his body completely covered by his copious garment. His head is bowed, his face pensive. His left elbow rests on a rock as his left hand is braced against his left cheek and his right hand rests on the garment covering his right knee.

⁹⁷ Wittkower, 479-80. Cf. Julius Held and Donald Posner, *17th and 18th Century Art* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall and New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1972), 340.

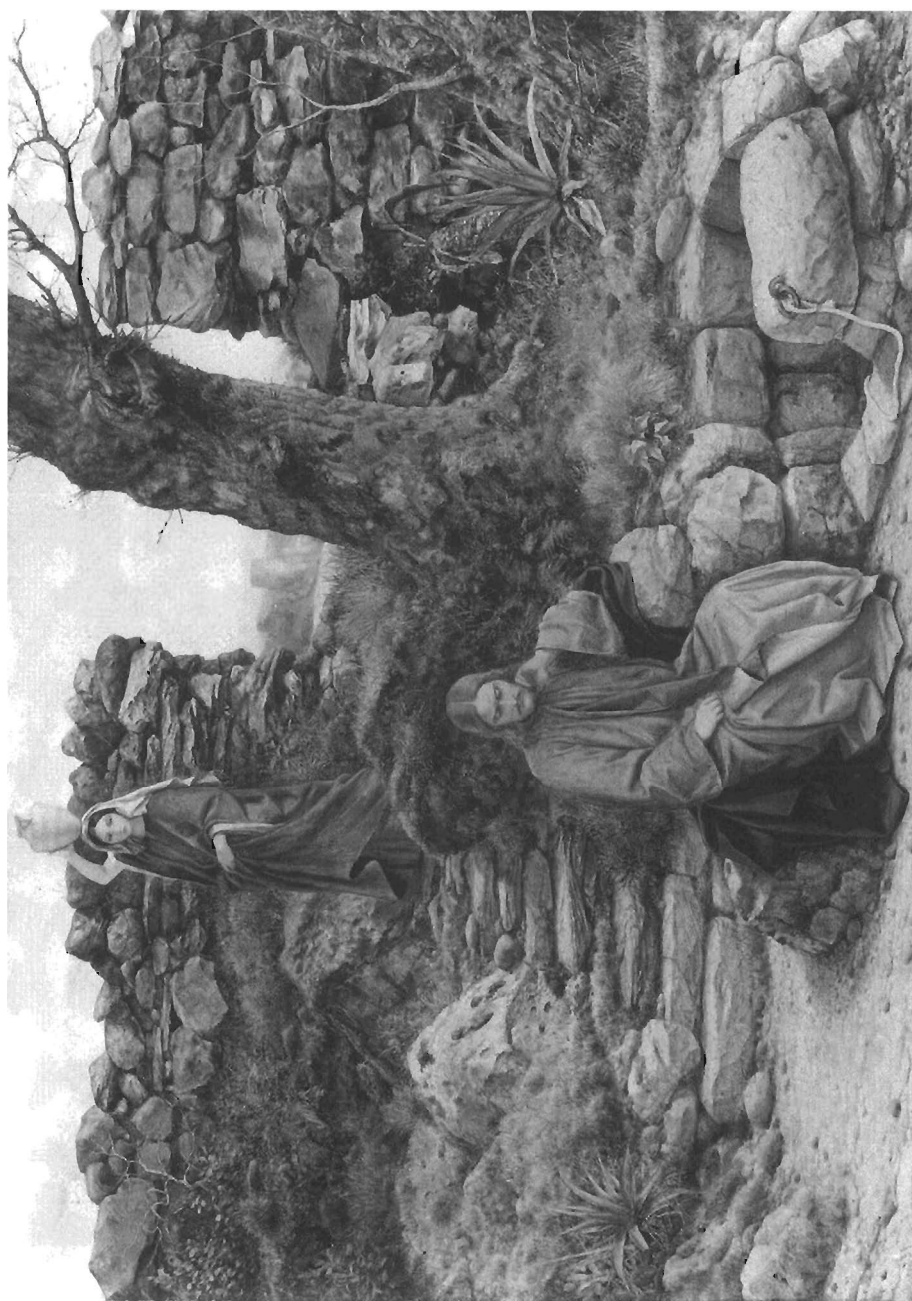
⁹⁸ Stokstad, 1004.

⁹⁹ The Nazarenes were members of an association of young German painters of the early nineteenth century who sought a return to the medieval spirit in art. They believed that all art should serve a moral or religious purpose. Consequently, they admired painters of the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance, but rejected most subsequent painting, believing that it abandoned religious ideals in favor of artistic virtuosity.

¹⁰⁰ William Gaunt, *The Restless Century: Painting in Britain, 1800-1900* (London: Phaidon, 1972), 222.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., Plate 112.

¹⁰² Bruce, 284.



31. William Dyce. *Woman of Samaria*. Oil painting. ca. 1833. Birmingham, Eng., City Museum and Art Gallery. Credit: Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery

Behind him a high stone wall transverses the entire width of the picture, broken only by an opening for a footpath and stone steps that lead down to the well. It is on this path, just about to descend the steps to the well, that the woman is placed, holding her water jar on her head with her right hand. She, too, is completely covered by full, flowing garments, the outer being lifted slightly by her left hand to facilitate her descent of the steps. Her hair is dark, but visible only around her forehead because her head is completely covered by a cloth cast over it and descending to her shoulders and down her back. She appears to be looking at Jesus, who does not yet see her, and her face is young and lovely. Her expression is watchful and modest, her eyes downcast. This painting, in contrast with the others, portrays the woman and Jesus before their encounter, but there is not the slightest hint of the woman's questionable character in her dress or manner. Since she is pictured behind Jesus in the painting, it reveals nothing of the nature of their interaction or conversation.

The Twentieth Century

With the dawn of the twentieth century, we encounter totally new horizons in artistic expression. Not only does less twentieth-century art find inspiration in biblical themes, but the artistic expression tends to be very personalized. Particularly the art of the late twentieth-century reflects the post-modern penchant for particularizing the arts to reflect the artist's own social location.¹⁰³ Thus we see in the four twentieth-century portrayals of Christ and the Samaritan woman that each reflects the native culture of its artist.

Beginning with the 1914 German painting (fig. 32) by Edouard von Gebhardt (1838-1925), we see clearly contemporary German settings and realistic human forms. Gebhardt's practice was to place his paintings of scriptural incidents into a German setting.¹⁰⁴ He was

¹⁰³ "Christian artists . . . attempt to make the persons and incidents of the Gospel come alive for the people of their own time. The artists keep in mind their own, not future, generations." Philip and Sally Scharper, eds., *The gospel in Art by the Peasants of Solentiname* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984), [ii]. "The Bible speaks universal words of life which are the same wherever they are read. But the context in which those words are read, imagined and interpreted differs from one culture to another." Masao Takenaka and Ron O'Grady, *The Bible Through Asian Eyes* (Auckland, New Zealand: Pace Publishing, 1991), 7.

¹⁰⁴ Gebhardt devoted himself primarily to religious subjects. His style, which was influenced by the Dutch masters, "protested the romanticism of the Nazarene



32. Edouard von Gebhardt. *The Woman of Samaria*. Oil painting. 1914. Location unknown. Credit: Bailey, Plate 6

particularly influenced by his appreciation for the age of Martin Luther, pointing out that "We read the Bible in Luther's language; why not portray Biblical events in the attire of Luther's time?"¹⁰⁵

The figure of Christ is pictured wearing a loose and flowing robe that reflects the artist's attempt to acknowledge Jesus' Middle Eastern nationality, but his facial features are recognizably European. His long hair and beard look like the unkempt straggle of a German farmer more than the carefully groomed hair and beard of a Palestinian rabbi evident in the earlier portrayals. The straw farmer's hat lying beside him over the end of a sturdy walking stick further contributes to the image of a German peasant.

The woman's form is clearly that of a coarse, working-class person. Her exposed forearms are muscular, her feet bare and her ankles thick in the manner of common, working women. Her facial features are strong and her expression jocular. Her clothing is clearly utilitarian and her hair is covered by an ordinary cap or cloth wrapped around it. Even the wooden buckets she is using to pour up her water are distinctively European versus the clay water pots of Palestine.

The pastoral setting of this scene further emphasizes its Germanic setting. The tall, leafy trees and the Gothic tower in the background are characteristic of central Europe, not Palestine. The other women and the children in the scene are dressed European style, but oddly enough, the three male figures shown approaching from the rear appear to be wearing the traditional Middle Eastern head covering.

The woman in this painting is evidently enjoying her conversation with Jesus and exhibits no shyness about dialoging with him. Although her manner seems familiar, it is a camaraderie-type of familiarity often evident among working-class people, not a seductive or enticing type of behavior. The physical distance separating her from Jesus is appropriate for their respective roles. His right hand is extended in a gesture perhaps indicative of his offer to give her "living water" and his expression indicates his interest in her response. As with most of the earlier pictures there is nothing in Gebhardt's painting to suggest the woman's promiscuity, unless the cordiality of her expression is interpreted thus. It might also pos-

group." Bernard S. Myers, *Dictionary of Art*, Vol. 2 (London: McGraw-Hill, 1969), 478.

¹⁰⁵ Albert Edward Bailey, *Christ and His Gospel in Recent Art* (New York: Scribner's, 1948), [6].

sibly be construed that since the other women in the painting are laying out clothes to dry on the grass and having no interaction with Jesus, that this woman's willingness to converse with him is evidence of a looser moral character.

The other twentieth-century artistic representations of Christ and the Samaritan woman reflect strongly the cultures that produced them. The work by an unknown Indian artist, dated to 1941, presents the woman in attire consonant with an eastern culture (fig. 33).¹⁰⁶ Her clothing reflects the wrapped and flowing garments characteristic of her country and she wears bracelets on both her upper arms and at her wrists, such as are common in eastern settings. Her water pot appears to be a clay jar that has a simple decorative ring painted around its surface. Her hair is neatly pulled back behind her ears and she wears dangling earrings in the manner of many eastern women. The combined effect of her clothing style, her neat appearance, and her jewelry would convey the idea of a woman of some means, not a poor or marginalized person. Her face is young, but shows some maturity. Her facial expression is difficult to interpret, but she is looking intently at Jesus as he speaks to her.

The figure of Jesus, likewise, though arguably Middle Eastern in his facial features, wears a more Far Eastern garment. His long robe is secured at the waist by a band in the eastern fashion rather than allowed to fall freely from the shoulders as is the practice in the Middle East. The stole draped symmetrically over his shoulders and hanging down the right front of his robe gives him a look of a more materially-minded teacher than the Jesus of the gospels who lacked even a place to lay his head.

This depiction of the scene might well be interpreted as casting the woman's character in a questionable light. Her bare arms and bracelets may be intended to project allure and her figure is drawn with feminine realism. Her well-formed and prominent breasts give way to a narrow waist that draws on to curvaceous hips. Her figure is definitely young and ripe and inviting. Her hair style, which shows off her exposed ears and earrings, also contributes to the picture of her as a desirable woman. The spatial relationship between her figure and that of Jesus is appropriate to the gospel account of their conversation. Although Jesus' facial features contribute to a handsome

¹⁰⁶ Arno Lehmann, *Christian Art in Africa and Asia*, trans. Erich Hopka, Jalo E. Napola, and Otto E. Sohn (St. Louis: Concordia, 1969), 270.



33. Unknown Indian artist. *Christ and the Woman at the Well*. Work on paper. 1941. India, Private Collection. Credit: Lehmann, Plate 185.

appearance, his expression and his outstretched, gesturing left hand indicate a proper representation of his role in the encounter.

The abstractionism of late twentieth-century art is evident in the Sri Lankan painting of Christ and the Samaritan woman (fig. 34). Painted by a Buddhist monk, Hatigamma Uttarananda (b. 1954), it reflects his interest in liberation theology, particularly as it affects the people of Sri Lanka today. He finds in Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman a model for breaking through the barriers of ethnicity and uncleanness, which still have relevance in Sri Lanka today. His painting reveals his sense of "the way Jesus speaks to the woman as an equal and recognizes her human dignity."¹⁰⁷

The figures of both Jesus and the woman have a representational appearance. His figure is clearly male and hers is clearly female, as indicated by their clothing, but their features are generic and not individualized. What speaks in this painting is their facial expressions. She appears to be young, but her expression reflects a sense of worthlessness and meek submission. His expression is kind and gentle, even respectful, as he holds out his hands for her to pour water from her clay jar. The strong vertical lines of the painting minimize any distracting background elements and help to focus attention on the two central characters.

In this painting there is nothing to cause any question about the woman's morality. The professed concern of Uttarananda to see the incident as a behavior modification model is evident in the way he has emphasized the kindly interaction between two people who are vastly separated by their culture. This painting might be conceived as a vivid demonstration of Post-Modernism's tendency to appropriate images of the past and to alter or modify their meaning by placing them in a new context.¹⁰⁸ Yet in a truer sense, while it *has* changed the context, it has only slightly shifted the meaning because, indeed, a significant part of what Jesus was doing in his encounter with the Samaritan woman *was* to break down the barriers of ethnicity and uncleanness—not just for social reasons, but so the way could be opened for non-Jews to receive the "living water" he had come to bring.

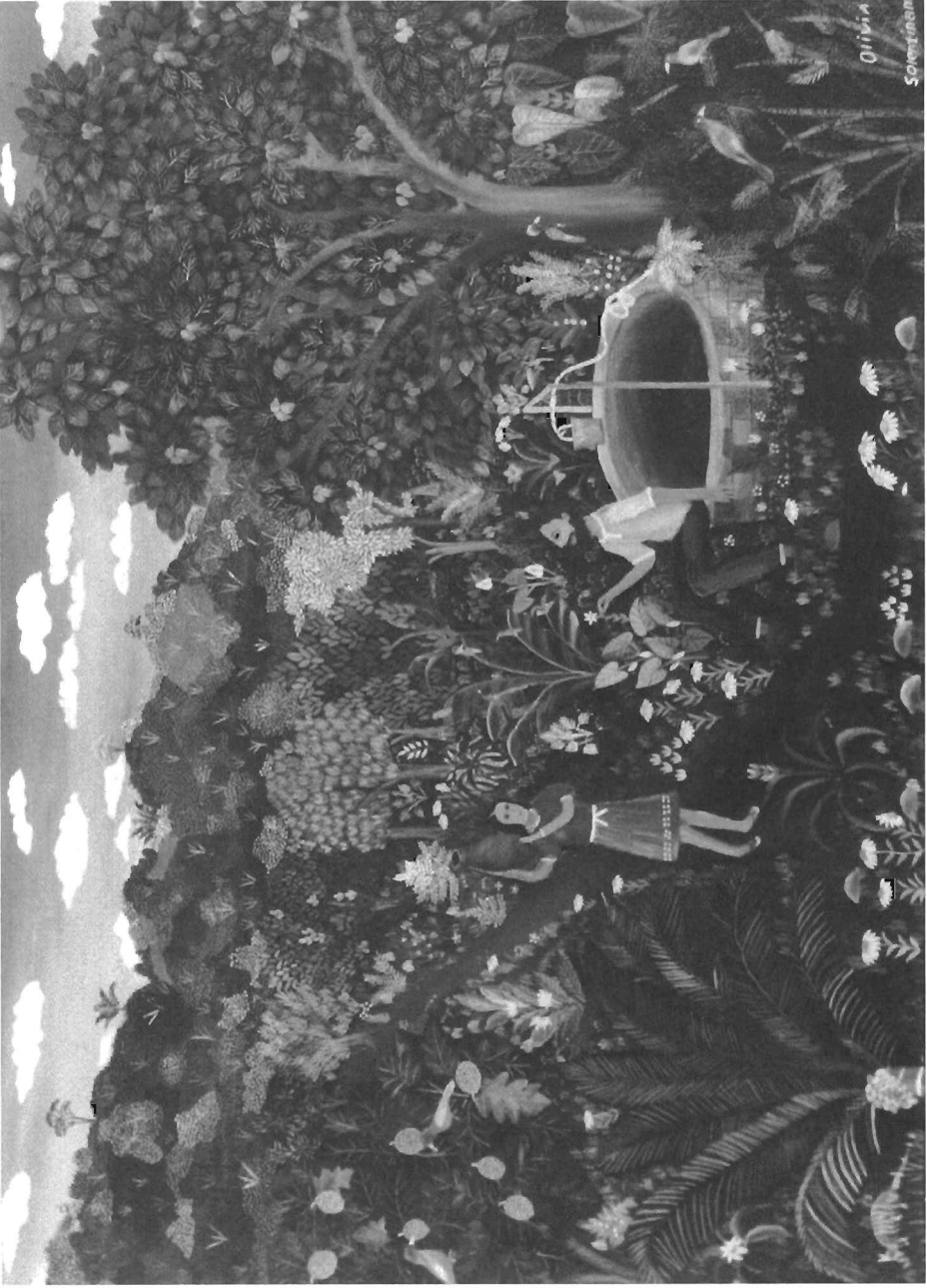
The final work to be considered (fig. 35) also reflects a late twentieth-century preoccupation with the Bible's ability to speak to po-

¹⁰⁷ Takenaka and O'Grady, 96.

¹⁰⁸ H. W. Janson, *A History of Art*, 4th ed. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1991), 754.



34. Hatigammana Uttarananda. *The Woman at the Well*. Oil painting, ca. 1980. Private collection. Credit: Takenaka and O'Grady, p. 97.



35. Olivia Silva. *Jesus and the Samaritan Woman*. Oil painting. 1981/82. Solentiname, Nicaragua, Private collection. Credit: Peter Hammer Verlag/Schöner n. 47

litical situations. It was painted by Olivia Silva (b. ca. 1950), a peasant from Solentiname, Nicaragua, a village that was destroyed during the political conflict of the 1970's and reconstructed in the 1980's by its former inhabitants.¹⁰⁹ This painting, like the previous one from Sri Lanka, reflects a transformation of the biblical event to fit a contemporary, localized setting, a Nicaraguan peasant village.

In the tradition of ethnic folk art, the artist has portrayed both Jesus and the woman as Solentiname peasants. There is no attempt to conceptualize the biblical setting nor to dress the figures in Middle Eastern garments. Jesus wears jeans and a simple short-sleeved shirt while the woman wears a brightly colored knee-length dress with short sleeves. The woman approaches along a path to the well, clay water pot on her shoulder; Jesus sits on the edge of the well, gesturing with his right hand.

Nothing in this painting even remotely suggests an immoral character for the woman. Perhaps in our day when sexual liberty is more the norm than the exception, the emphasis falls naturally on the "living water" as the source of meaningful life. Perhaps from the perspective of oppressed peasants who introduce themselves into the experience, identifying with the woman as a fellow outcast, the woman's sin is the universal sin that infects every human life. She need not be portrayed as promiscuous; painting her sin so vividly allows us to self-righteously stand outside the event and judge her. Seeing ourselves in her makes her particular sin irrelevant—she, as we, needs the cleansing water of life that only Jesus can give. Maybe the peasants are on to something basic to understanding the event.

SUMMARY

Thus we conclude a selective survey of the artistic interpretations of the John 4 account of Jesus' meeting with a Samaritan woman at a well. Most consistently, and almost without exception, we have found no tendency to portray the woman as an immoral or seductive or hostile person. Only subsequent to the Reformation do we find occasional paintings that picture her as a courtesan or "loose" woman, as in the paintings of Sebastiano Ricci. It is interesting that the woman always has a youthful appearance. That factor in itself may imply the artists' belief in her promiscuity, for a woman of good

¹⁰⁹ Scharper, [ii].

character who had outlived five husbands might well have been advanced in years.

While the absence of suggestive depictions cannot prove the Samaritan woman's character, it does seem to argue that through the centuries the emphasis has been upon the witnessing and teaching opportunity the encounter provided to Jesus. It could even be concluded that her depiction was considered relatively unimportant since she was viewed by so many interpreters simply as a figure representative of all Samaritans. As noted in Chapter Two, many interpreters have viewed the Samaritan woman as a symbol for all Samaritans as the gospel began to be spread beyond the confines of Judaism. Thus, if her role is merely symbolic, there would be no need to portray her individual characteristics.

It is not my task nor my intent here to draw unfounded conclusions. Indeed, the rejection of such tendencies is one of the points I am trying to make. Perhaps what is a fair conclusion to draw from analysis of these various paintings is that through the years, at least in the artistic realm, there has been room for a variety of interpretations about this woman and this event. In spite of the variety of artists and their representations of this biblical text, by far the majority of the paintings present her without evidence of a sexually promiscuous lifestyle. Even in the paintings of Veronese, Guercino, and Ricci, where some hints of such judgment may be found, these features are only subtle hints. It would be irresponsible to claim a conviction of immorality based upon such limited and subjective criteria.

The essentially consistent presentation of the Samaritan woman in a "positive" light, without evidence of an immoral character, is notably different from the evaluation of her character in the ecclesiastical literature surveyed in Chapter Two. The one favorable aspect of the woman in that ecclesiastical literature, which emphasized her role as a witness, seems to have dominated the artistic depictions of her.

While the artists and their patrons may have shared the Church's conviction of her immorality, that characterization is not what they chose to portray in their paintings. For the artists, who sought to portray in a single image the significance of this event in the life of Christ, the primary importance was attached to the woman's reception of Jesus' truth and her subsequent role as a witness to her people.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE SAMARITAN WOMAN AS ENGLISH-SPEAKING WRITERS HAVE DEPICTED HER

The Bible's influence on English literature is unmistakable. Many books and articles have acknowledged and traced the Bible's influence upon the entire stream of English literature or upon particular literary eras or genres.¹ While the broad biblical influence on English literature is commonly acknowledged, and specific authors and literary works have been explored for their biblical themes,² much less attention has been directed to the influence of specific pericopes upon English literature. There have been significant poetic works developed around specific biblical characters, such as John Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, *Judas Iscariot* and *Ananias and Sapphira* by Edgar Lee Masters, Lord Byron's *Saul*, and Edward Arlington Robinson's *Lazarus*, *Sisera*, and *Nicodemus*. In many of these cases, the poets have used the biblical characterizations for their own purposes, but depend upon knowledge of the biblical allusion to enlighten the reader's or hearer's understanding of their work.

Literary scholars generally agree that the Bible's influence upon English literature may take a variety of paths. A fundamental work for understanding the Bible's impact on secular literature is C. S.

¹ While the list is copious, some representative examples are: Margaret B. Crook, *The Bible and Its Literary Associations* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1937); Henrietta Tichy, *Biblical Influences in English Literature: A Survey of Studies* (Ann Arbor: Edwards Brothers, 1953); David C. Fowler, *The Bible in Early English Literature* (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1976); *The Bible in Middle English Literature* (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1984); Murray Roston, *Biblical Drama in England* (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1968); Joseph Oscar Loos, *The Influence of the English Bible upon the English Language and upon English and American Literature* (n.p.: Folcroft Library Editions, 1976); William Gilmer Perry, "English Literature's Debt to the Bible," *The North American Review* CXCVIII (Aug. 1913): 227-239.

² Naseeb Shaheen, *Biblical References in The Faerie Queene* (Memphis: Memphis State University Press, 1976); *Biblical References in Shakespeare's Tragedies* (Newark: Univ. of Delaware Press, 1987); Lawrence Besserman, *Chaucer and the Bible: A Critical Review of Research, Indexes, and Bibliography* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1988); James H. Sims, *The Bible in Milton's Epics* (Gainesville: Univ. of Florida Press, 1962); Edna Moore Robinson, *Tennyson's Use of the Bible* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1917), etc.

Lewis' essay, *The Literary Impact of the Authorized Version*.³ There he makes a distinction between the Bible as a literary source and the Bible as a literary influence: "A source gives us things to write about; an influence prompts us to write in a certain way."⁴ The Samaritan woman pericope has functioned in both of these ways in its impact upon secular literature.

Leland Ryken further elaborates these two broad streams of biblical effect upon imaginative literature by suggesting various ways in which the biblical text is appropriated by creative writers. In its most direct form, the Bible as a source provides the subject matter of poems, stories, and plays. However, writers often differ in how they approach the subject.⁵

A writer may choose simply to re-tell the biblical story in an imaginative way, filling in the gaps and recreating the event so that it comes alive for his or her readers. It is difficult, however, to re-tell a biblical narrative without interpreting it because the teller's imagination begins to fill in the gaps of the narrative. And the writer's intention will affect how faithfully he or she recreates the scriptural story:

At one end of the spectrum we get the impression that the author wished to remain as faithful as possible to the Bible. As we move across the continuum, writers feel free to reinterpret a biblical character or event, and at the far end of the spectrum we sense that the writer was attracted to the biblical material not for its own sake but as the best possible vehicle for expressing his or her own vision of life.⁶

In the oldest English literature that draws on the Bible as its source, the most common approach was to retell the biblical story, often in verse, following as faithfully as possible the original text. In time, as the English drama reveals, the biblical story was embellished with non-biblical elements in order to increase its appeal as entertainment. And in the more modern adaptations, often the biblical narrative or character serves only as a point of departure for presenting the author's own viewpoint. Each of these approaches is evident in the literature influenced by the Samaritan woman pericope, from

³ C. S. Lewis, *The Literary Impact of the Authorized Version* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963).

⁴ Ibid, 15.

⁵ Leland Ryken, "The Literary Influence of the Bible," in *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman III (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 474.

⁶ Ibid, 476.

the earliest devout scriptural paraphrases to a contemporary “new” gospel fiction, imaginatively and creatively told in first person by the Samaritan woman herself.

Literary allusions provide a transitional link between the Bible as a source and the Bible as an influence. These allusions require that the readers be familiar with the pertinent biblical passage.⁷ An example of such allusion, drawing upon the Samaritan woman pericope, is found in John Greenleaf Whittier’s poem, “Mogg Megone,” in which Ruth Boniton recalls the stories her mother used to tell her including the one

Of her, Samaria’s humble daughter,
Who paused to hear, beside her well,
Lessons of love and truth, which fell
Softly as Shiloh’s flowing water;
And saw, beneath his pilgrim guise,
The Promised One, so long foretold
By holy seer and bard of old.
Revealed before her wondering eyes!⁸

Without knowledge of the biblical text, Whittier’s reference is unintelligible, and the poem’s meaning missed.

As a literary influence, the Bible has guided writers in the development of characters and plots as well as in writing style. Various authors have used the language of the Bible, as well as its imagery and syntax, to convey impressions to their readers with a minimum of explanation.⁹ For example, Emily Dickinson, in her poem “I know where Wells grow—” uses the imagery of Jesus’ conversation with the Samaritan woman to grapple with the idea of spiritual thirst:

I read in an Old Fashioned Book
That People ‘thirst no more.’¹⁰

The reference to wells, to an “Old Fashioned Book,” along with the quoted words, “thirst no more,” recreate in the reader’s mind the biblical event and thus provide understanding of Dickinson’s work.

⁷ Ryken, 477.

⁸ *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, vol. 4 (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1892), 372-73; cf. W. B. Fulghum, *A Dictionary of Biblical Allusions in English Literature* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), 216.

⁹ Ryken, 480.

¹⁰ Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1960), 221. Cf. Faye Pauli Whitaker, “Woman at the Well,” in *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature*, ed. David Lyle Jeffrey, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 845, for this allusion and several others referred to in this chapter.

In all of these ways, the John 4 narrative of Jesus' meeting with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well near Sychar has made an impact on English literature. As the works presented in this chapter indicate, throughout English literary history, this pericope has served both as source for subject matter and allusion and as influence through its characters and imagery.

THE PATRISTIC PERIOD AND THE MIDDLE AGES

According to Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, the extant English literature inspired by the Bible began with Caedmon, a young man resident in the monastery at Whitby during the late seventh century.¹¹ As Bede records the tale, it was customary, following dinner in the monastery, to pass around a harp to each of the participants that they might entertain the group with a song. On one such occasion, Caedmon, embarrassed by his inability to sing, slipped away to the stable where he fell asleep. Roused by a celestial being, Caedmon was instructed to sing "about the beginning of created things," and he began to compose what has been deemed "the first piece of extant literature composed on English soil."¹² Each day thereafter, Caedmon was familiarized with a portion of scripture, which he then composed into verse.¹³

Following the pattern set by Caedmon, other paraphrases of scriptural portions sprang forth until such poetic compositions became a literary fashion. In these poetic retellings of biblical narratives, certain Old Testament stories and events from the life and passion of Jesus were the favorites. In time apocryphal stories also became popular. Among the oldest and best-known examples of biblical paraphrases are *Genesis and Exodus*, *Azariah*, *Daniel*, and *Judith*.¹⁴

¹¹ Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1994), 215.

¹² A.S. Cook and C.B. Tucker, *Select Translations From Old English Poetry* (Boston: Ginn & Co., 1902), 76.

¹³ Bede, 216.

¹⁴ Albert C. Baugh, ed., *A Literary History of England* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1948), 61-68. Cf. Eric Gerald Stanley, ed., *Continuations and Beginnings: Studies in Old English Literature* (London: Nelson, 1966); George Sampson, *The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature* (Cambridge: University Press, 1941), 6-8.

There is at least one extant example of an old English paraphrase of the Samaritan woman pericope, dating from the thirteenth century. The specific lines that reveal the Samaritan woman's character begin with her response to Jesus' request for a drink:

Yef me drynke wymmon. he seyde myd mylde Muþe.
 þeo wymmon him onswerede. al so to mon vukuþe.
 Hwat ar-tu. þat drynke me byst. þu þinchest of iudelonde. 19
 Ne mostu drynke vnder-fo. none of myne honde.¹⁵

The woman expresses no concern that she is a woman and Jesus a man; her only objection to giving him water is that he is a Jew: "You seem of Judea-land." It is impossible to tell from the discourse whether her tone is sarcastic or merely incredulous when she asks, "What are you that ask of me a drink?" The only hint given by the author is that she spoke as to "a man unknown," which he was. Nevertheless, she is adamant in her refusal to give him a drink, adhering to the traditional enmity between Samaritans and Jews; he will not receive a drink from her hand.

The lines of this paraphrase that convey the writer's opinion of the Samaritan woman are those concerning her marital status:

Go and clepe þine were. and cumeþ hider y-mene.
 I nabbe heo seyde nenne were. ich am my seolf al one.
 Nabbe ich of weþmonne. nones kunnes y-mone. 32
 Wel þu seyst quap ihesu crist. wére. þat þu nauest nenne.
 Fyue þu hauest ar þisse iheued. and yet þu hauest enne.
 And þe þat þu nuþe hauest. and heuedest summe þrowe.
 He is an oþer wyues were. more þan þin owe.¹⁶ 36

The writer's method of reconstructing the dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman makes it plain that he or she considers the woman to be an immoral person. When Jesus responds to the woman's reply that she has no husband, he says, "Well you say . . . that you have none . . . Five you have had . . . and he that you now have . . . is another woman's man, more than your own." (See lines 33-36).¹⁷ Clearly, the writer interprets the woman's past five relationships as irregular, and considers her present arrangement to be an adulterous one. The writer also considers her to be of lim-

¹⁵ Richard Morris, ed., *An Old English Miscellany* (London: Published for the Old English Text Society by H. Millford, Oxford Univ. Press, 1927), 84.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

ited intelligence since she did not understand Jesus' offer of living water: "Heo nuste hwat heo mende. heo wes of wytte poure."¹⁸

The discussion with the disciples, as recounted in John 4:31-38 about the readiness of the harvest and the separate roles of sowers and reapers, is omitted from the paraphrase. Yet it concludes with the woman's testimony to her city and its result in bringing many Samaritans to belief. The overall thrust of the piece focuses on the positive role of the woman as a witness, even though it leaves no doubt that her previous life was an immoral one.

By far the best-known medieval literary character influenced by the Samaritan woman is Chaucer's (d. 1400) Wife of Bath in *The Canterbury Tales*.¹⁹ Although Chaucer describes her as "a worthy woman al hir lyve" in his General Prologue, the Wife is a composite character who depicts herself in the prologue to her tale as exemplifying all the traits of a deceitful and conniving wife.²⁰ She readily describes the way she manipulated her husbands in order to have her own way and avail herself of their assets while carrying on with other men as she felt inclined. That the Wife of Bath is described both in terms of the Samaritan woman of John 4 and as the antithesis of the "virtuous woman" of Proverbs 31, gives clear indication that the Samaritan woman was perceived as an undesirable model of womanhood.²¹

The Wife's reference to her five husbands in the *Prologue* to her tale reminds the reader of the biblical Samaritan woman who also had five husbands:

Housbondes at chirche dore I have had fyve—
If I so ofte myghte have ywedded bee
And alle were worthy men in hir degrec.²²

¹⁸ Ibid. (l. 27).

¹⁹ Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, in Larry D. Benson, ed., *The Riverside Chaucer*. 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 3-328.

²⁰ Ibid. 30.

²¹ Robert T. Miller, "Allegory in the *Canterbury Tales*," in *Companion to Chaucer Studies*, ed. Beryl Rowland, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1979), 345. Cf. Frances M. Biscoglio, *The Wives of the Canterbury Tales and the Tradition of the Valiant Woman of Proverbs 31:10-31* (San Francisco: Mellen Research Univ. Press, 1993), 69. Benson, in *The Riverside Chaucer* comments that "most of her characteristics can be traced in anti-feminine satire and she herself embodies almost all the faults traditionally imputed to women . . .", 11.

²² Chaucer, 105.

She then challenges the argument of some that since Christ is reported to have attended only one wedding—in Cana of Galilee—“I ne sholde wedded be but ones.”²³

The idea that no one should marry more than once was documented in St. Jerome’s fourth century treatise, *Against Jovinianus*. Jerome’s argument is based on two scriptural supports: (1) Christ’s attendance at only the one wedding at Cana, and (2) the implication that “where there are more marriages than one, a true husband does not exist.”²⁴ This latter position was based on Christ’s statement to the Samaritan woman that her present man was not her husband.

The wedding at Cana is considered relevant to the issue of multiple marriages because it was the source for the sacramental understanding of marriage.²⁵ Because it was the only wedding attended by Christ, it necessarily provided the model for the Church’s sacrament, but its singularity was also deemed significant. Thus the sacrament, as a “sign of the relationship between Christ and the Church . . . forms a model for the relationship between husband and wife in Christian marriage.”²⁶ With the union of husband and wife signifying the union of Christ and the Church, it follows that there should be only one wife (the Church) for one husband (Christ). By rejecting the Church’s teaching in this regard, the Wife shows that she disdains the sacramental aspect of marriage. Like the Samaritan woman, she fails to apprehend the “spirit” of the teaching.²⁷

The Wife adds to the reproof concerning multiple husbands by quoting Jesus’ words to the Samaritan woman at the well:

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ St. Jerome, *Against Jovinianus*, in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, trans. W. H. Fremantle, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. Second Series, Vol. VI (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), 358.

²⁵ D. W. Robertson, *A Preface to Chaucer* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), 320-21, offers an additional argument concerning the significance of the marriage at Cana: it was the scene of Christ’s first miracle, turning the water to wine. Robertson recounts the tropological interpretation given by Nicolas de Goran who saw in the five husbands of both women [the Samaritan woman and the Wife of Bath] a preference for the laws of the first five ages of the law over the sixth age of spiritual enlightenment. Robertson also points out that the Glossa in the *Canterbury Tales* discusses the conversation between Christ and the Samaritan woman in terms of Augustine’s interpretation of the five husbands either as a reference to the five ages or to the five senses. Augustine’s interpretation is discussed in Chapter Two of this work.

²⁶ Ibid., 319.

²⁷ Ibid.

Herkne eek, lo, which a sharp word for the nones,
 Beside a wellc, Jhesus, God and man,
 Spak in repreewe of the Samaritan:
 'Thou hast yhad fyve housbondes,' quod he,
 'And that ilke man that now hath thee
 Is noght thyn housbonde,' thus seyde he certeyn.
 What that he mente therby, I kan nat seyn;²⁸

Although the Wife claims that she does not understand the meaning of Jesus' words to the Samaritan woman, her allusion reveals her own understanding of the accepted characterization of the Samaritan woman. She describes Jesus as speaking "sharply" and "rebuking" the woman, unmistakable indicators that he is reprimanding her for her manner of life.

The Wife of Bath explains the basis for the Church's understanding that the Samaritan woman was rebuked by Jesus. Her "sin" is identified with her multiple marriages, but the Wife challenges the idea that multiple marriages are forbidden by Scripture:

But that I axe, why that the fifthe man
 Was noon housbonde to the Samaritan?
 How manye myghte she have in mariage?
 Yet herde I nevere tellen in myn age
 Upon this nombre diffinicioun.

 But of no nombre mencion made he,
 Of bigamyc, or of octogamyc;²⁹

This medieval concern with multiple marriages implies immoral behavior on the part of the Samaritan woman. Indeed, if the characterization is reversed—the character of the Wife of Bath being imposed on the Samaritan woman—the story behind the multiple marriages is an immoral one. However, the interpretive approach that casts the Samaritan woman as a prostitute ignores the issue of whether the men in her life were lawful husbands or only paramours, each being cast aside for the next liaison. The Wife's prolonged discourse on marriage and virginity, based on various "proof texts" that she employs to suit her purposes, reflects a challenge to the accepted ecclesiastical tradition that multiple marriages were unac-

²⁸ Chaucer, 105.

²⁹ Ibid. The Wife's use of "octogamyc;" may also reflect a reference to Jerome's treatise, *Against Jovinianus*, because in his discussion concerning remarriage he asserts: "I do not condemn second, nor third, nor, pardon the expression, eighth marriages" (359).

ceptable. It is unlikely that Chaucer was challenging the Church's interpretation of the Samaritan woman pericope in the Wife's discussion; rather it seems likely that he was merely reflecting doctrinal issues of his own time.

THE RENAISSANCE AND THE REFORMATION

The next occurrence of a work that makes reference to the Samaritan woman appears in a series of homilies entitled *Jacob's Well*, dated to the fifteenth century.³⁰ This work, taking its title from John 4:6, is an allegory according to a common practice of the time. "It was a frequent practice among writers of theological allegories to take a simile or *figure*, as they call it, from the Scripture, and to set it in motion, as it were, expanding it into a sort of allegorical action, and giving it a forced interpretation, which they may already have found in the gloss."³¹

The allegory of *Jacob's Well*, an extensive and detailed work, represents the sinful body of human beings as a pit full of foul water and oozy mire. The pit must be cleansed by a progressive process with various implements so that it may become a fit receptacle for the clear water of grace. It requires the utmost effort to cast out the mire of deadly sin, but once that cleansing has been done, we reach

the firm ground of the Seven Virtues, in which there are seven water-springs, the gifts of the Holy Ghost. But to prevent curse and sin from re-entering the pit, the five water-gates, *i.e.* the five senses, must be shut against temptation. When all this is done, we may think of curbing our well with stones, *i.e.* the works of Faith. And then, Our Lord may rest at the well, and the Samaritan woman, man's soul, will refresh him with the water of Grace. And after death, our soul will climb up to heaven by the ladder of Charity.³²

Neither the form nor the substance of this work is unique for the time. There was a widespread class of writings, in both poetry and prose, whose purpose was to summarize or condense the penitential process for use by the laity and clergy.³³ According to the writer's own report in the final chapter, the work's ninety-five sermons,

³⁰ Arthur Brandeis, ed., *Jacob's Well*, (London: EETS, o.s. 115, by Kegan Paul, et al, 1900).

³¹ Brandeis, v.

³² *Ibid*, vi.

³³ *Ibid*.

which are always concluded by exhortatory stories or anecdotes, were delivered over a period of some twenty months.³⁴

The second part of the work, chapters fifty-one through ninety-five, was never published; thus the portion of the allegory that treats of the Samaritan woman as the human soul, refreshing Christ with the “water of Grace,” is not available for analysis. However, in chapter twenty-eight, as part of the discussion on the need for weeping as part of the confession step in penitence, the author makes allegorical use of the Samaritan woman pericope:

crist restyd him be þe pyt & þe welle of samarye, þat is, be þe synfull body, sory of his synne. & crist askyd watyr of þe womman samaritan, þat is, he askyth watyr of wepyng terys of synfull soule for his synnes.³⁵

This brief allusion to the Samaritan woman, specifically associating her with the penitential tears of the weeping soul, points again to an understanding of the Samaritan woman as the epitome of sinfulness. This conception, coupled with Brandeis’ analysis of the end of the work where the cleansed and purified soul is able to refresh Christ with the water of grace, emphasizes the penitential significance of the pericope and the representational character of the Samaritan woman. With her conversion as the focus, the more elaborately she is portrayed as sinner, the more awesome is her repentance and belief. Thus she serves as an exemplar for other sinful souls that they, too, may be redeemed by means of repentance and belief. This presentation of the Samaritan woman capitalizes on her usefulness for leading others to belief, but by her example rather than by her testimony.

Another common method for disseminating and extending knowledge of the Bible during medieval times developed in the form of liturgical drama, which evolved into vernacular dramas based on biblical stories or themes. Scholars have concluded that the medieval drama had its beginnings in the antiphonal sequences of the liturgy, most likely from the Easter Introit known as the *Quem Quaeritis*.³⁶ These two Latin words from the opening line of the Easter

³⁴ Ibid, viii. A source study for the narrative exempla that conclude the sermons has been made by Joan Young Gregg, “The Narrative Exempla of *Jacob’s Well*: A Source Study with an Index for *Jacob’s Well* to *Index Exemplorum*” (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1973).

³⁵ Ibid, 185.

³⁶ David Fowler, *The Bible in Middle English Literature* (Seattle & London: Univ. of Washington Press, 1984), 16.

dialogue, which are translated, "Whom are you seeking," initiated a responsorial litany between the clergy and the congregation.

As this simple dialogue was expanded and then dramatized, eventually full-length Resurrection plays developed. Christmas or Nativity dramas soon followed the Easter dramatizations, then other episodes from the life of Christ, and eventually, lives of saints. As these dramas gained in popularity and incorporated more secular elements for entertainment value, they moved outside the church into the courtyards, and then were taken over by the craft guilds and developed into the great mystery play cycles of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.³⁷

These medieval dramas, drawing as they often did upon legendary material, incorporate the Samaritan woman pericope in an unusual way. In some medieval legends, Mary Magdalene, always a popular figure, was associated with the Samaritan woman. Apparently the identification of the two women was based upon "a common history of promiscuity and a conversion experience from which follows a career as a disciple of Jesus."³⁸ As a result of this identification, a fifteenth-century play entitled *Mary Magdalen* incorporates certain features of the Samaritan woman story into the Mary Magdalen narrative.

The play *Mary Magdalen* is a composite of material from the biblical account of her involvement with Jesus and *The Golden Legend* account.³⁹ The first part of the play follows the biblical material, although associating Mary Magdalen not only with those specific gospel events that name her explicitly, but also with the woman who anointed Jesus and bathed his feet with her tears (Matt 26:6-13, Mark 14:3-9, Luke 7:36-50, John 12:1-8), with Mary the sister of Martha and Lazarus, with the woman taken in adultery (John 8:1-11), and with the woman of Samaria (John 4:1-42).⁴⁰ The second part of the

³⁷ Crook, 343-45. Cf. Fowler, *Middle English*, 16-17; Baugh, 273-276.

³⁸ Whitaker, 845. The medieval fascination with Mary Magdalene resulted in her identification with several anonymous female figures in the New Testament narratives. Additionally, she was identified as the bride of "St. John the Evangelist" whose wedding is recorded in John's Gospel as the marriage feast at Cana in Galilee (John 2:1-10). This bride identification occurred in *The Golden Legend*, a late medieval collection of the lives of saints honored in the Church calendar, and a popular source for the embellishment of biblical narratives. Cf. Fowler, *Middle English*, 103.

³⁹ For identification of *The Golden Legend*, see previous note.

⁴⁰ Fowler, *Middle English*, 102.

play presents *The Golden Legend's* additions to the life of Mary Magdalen, including her career as a missionary to Marseilles, her subsequent retirement to the desert, and her death.⁴¹

The influence of the Samaritan woman pericope is confined to the first part of the play, which relies primarily upon the biblical material and follows it closely. Because the play combines elements of both the miracle play and the morality play, the writer apparently felt free to fill in the narrative gaps with morality devices.⁴²

The John 4 material appears in the form of allusions in the conversion episode of Mary. After the play establishes her riotous manner of living, Mary enters an arbor to await her lovers, but when none immediately appear, she decides to rest. She is awakened from her rest by the Good Angel who exhorts her:

Woman, woman, why art þou so unstable?
 Ful bytterly thys blysse it wol be bowth!
 Why art þou agens God so veryabyll?
 Wy thynkys þou nat God made þee of nowth?⁴³

Mary responds enthusiastically by vowing to give up her sinful dissolute life and follow Jesus:

I xal porsue þe Prophett wherso he be,
 For he is þe welle of perfyth charyte.
 Be þe oyle of mercy he xal me relyff.
 Wyth swete hawmys, I wyl sekyn hym þis syth,
 And sadly folow hys lordshep in eche degre.⁴⁴

She then returns to her siblings, Martha and Lazarus, joyfully reporting to them her deliverance:

The blyssyd Prophet, my comfortacyown,
 He hath made me clene and delectary,
 The wyche was to synne a subiectary.
 Thys Kyng, Cryste, consedyryd hys creacyown;
 I was drynychyn in synne deversarye
 Tyll that Lord relevyd me by hys domynacyon.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Donald C. Baker, John L. Murphy, and Louis B. Hall, Jr., eds., *The Late Medieval Religious Plays of Bodleian MSS Digby 133 and E Museo 160* (Oxford: Pub. for The Early English Text Society by the Oxford Univ. Press, 1982), xl.

⁴² Ibid., xlv.

⁴³ Baker, Murphy, and Hall, 43.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 44.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 49.

Mary's reference to the "prophet" (John 4:19), whom she calls "the well of perfect charity" (John 4:6-15) points the reader to the Samaritan woman episode.

Clearly, the portrayal of Mary Magdalen as dissolute and promiscuous prior to her conversion, and the specific allusions to the Samaritan woman pericope, indicate the author's perception that the Samaritan woman was of like character. Since the play was written for public performance, it seems safe to conclude that this characterization of the Samaritan woman was the commonly accepted one. Therefore, once again we find evidence in the popular culture for the church's interpretation of the Samaritan woman as a reprobate sinner. If the analogy between Mary Magdalen and the Samaritan woman is extended, the legendary tradition about Mary Magdalen that portrayed her work as an apostle following Christ's resurrection may also reflect respect for the Samaritan woman's role as a witness following her encounter with Jesus. There is no substantive support, however, for making such an assumption.

A notable feature of fifteenth-century English literature was the development of a new kind of contemplative or mystical prose. Growing out of the monastic revival of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and stimulated by the vernacular translation of the Bible by John Wycliffe, a new interest in spiritual prose emerged. A notable aspect of this interest in contemplative writings involved the translation of Latin texts that had become known and appreciated on the continent.⁴⁶

One major example of such translations, Nicholas Love's *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ* (ca. 1410), became one of the best loved of all medieval English books.⁴⁷ This volume was actually a translation, with adaptations by Love, of the *Meditationes vitae Christi*, a series of devotions that paralleled the gospel narrative of the life of Jesus Christ. Presenting the events of the gospel story in such imaginative compositions was

not to supplant the words of scripture, but rather to increase the devotion of the reader or hearer of the book by presenting not merely the story of Christ's life, but even the basic doctrines of Christianity in such a way that they can be held in the mind's eye and recalled at will."⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Baugh, 226-231; Sampson, 68.

⁴⁷ Sargent, Michael G., ed., *Nicholas Love's "Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ"* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1992).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, xv.

The episode relating Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman is brief in Love's treatment because "it is opun & pleynty writen in þe gospel of Jon."⁴⁹ However, what Love does tell of us of this encounter is revealing. He establishes that Jesus was en route from Judah to Galilee when he stopped at Jacob's well in Samaria to rest because he was weary. After an intervening paragraph of meditative reflection on Jesus' humanity, Love describes the encounter with the Samaritan woman:

In þe mene tyme as he sat so on þe welle, & hees disciples weren gone in to þe nekst Cite fort bigge mete.' þere came a woman of þat cuntrey to fette watere at þat welle, þe whiche was cleped *Lucye*. And oure lord Jesus willyng shewe to hir, & by hir to oþer his godhede.' Spake with hir longe tyme of gret þinge & hie in gostly vnderstandyng, . . .⁵⁰

At this point, Love summarizes the rest of the pericope concerning the return of the disciples, the woman's testimony to her townspeople, their response to Jesus, and his subsequent two day stay among them, with the explanation that "we passen ouer at þis tyme" because those details are freely available in John's gospel.⁵¹

Love's only other mention of the Samaritan woman comes in a meditative commendation of Jesus for his humility.

Also in þat he spake so homely with þat simple woman al one, & of so grete þinges, as þouh it hade be with many gret wise men.⁵²

Love points to this example of Jesus as a lesson by which "þe pride & þe presumption of many grete clerkes and prechours is confondet & reprouede," because they would consider such a simple audience unworthy of their proud speech.⁵³

Although Love's presentation of the Samaritan woman is quite brief, and he uses the encounter with her as a launching pad to extol the virtues of Christ and the vices of contemporary clergy, it is possible to draw some limited conclusions about his perception of the woman. Apparently, Love is willing to let the gospel account stand on its own, subject to the Church's standard interpretation. He mentions nothing of her marital status, referring only to her role as witness to her townspeople in his summary of details that need not be described.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 96.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid, 97.

⁵³ Ibid.

This acknowledgment of her witness is consistent with the early church's praise of her in that role, although normally an account of her own "conversion" is considered a necessary precursor to her testimony. In describing her as "simple," Love reflects the opinion that because she so stubbornly clings to a literal interpretation of Jesus' words, she must be of limited intelligence.

The Samaritan woman pericope during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was chiefly popular due to its typological significance "as the well of life and a symbol of baptism and regeneration."⁵⁴ Edmund Spenser (1552?-1599) in *The Faerie Queene* (1.2.43 and 1.11.29), as well as the metaphysical poet, Henry Vaughn (1622-1695), drew on the typology of the Samaritan well for its imagery of redemption and revivification.⁵⁵ The interest of these writers was entirely focused on the well and the symbolism that resulted from Christ's metaphor of the living water. Their focus on the living water as symbol required no mention of the woman whose conversation with Christ there provided the basis for their imagery.

In the latter part of the seventeenth century, Edward Taylor (1642-1729), an American poet, writing his *Preparatory Meditations*, spiritual poems to prepare for receiving the Lord's Supper, joins the typology of the well's "living water" with the "tree of life" typology from Genesis. He adds a sacramental dimension to the typological use of the well, entreating the Lord to "bath mee in this Well of Life."⁵⁶ Like Vaughn and Spenser, he uses the imagery of the well, but mentions nothing about the Samaritan woman.

THE MODERN ERA

Christopher Smart (1722-1771), writing scriptural paraphrases for children in the eighteenth century, returns to a complete inclusion

⁵⁴ Whitaker, 845.

⁵⁵ Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, vol. 1 (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1937); Henry Vaughn, *The Works of Henry Vaughn*, ed. L. C. Martin, 2d. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1957); Donald R. Dickson, *The Fountain of Living Waters: The Typology of the Waters of Life in Herbert, Vaughn, and Traherne* (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1987), 55-65, 140-141, discusses the John 4:14 reference in English poetic imagery and specifically treats Vaughn's various uses of the Christological typology of "the waters of life."

⁵⁶ Edward Taylor, *Preparatory Meditations* (2.47) in *The Poems of Edward Taylor*, ed. Donald E. Stanford (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1960), 166-167. Cf. Whitaker, 845.

of the biblical account. Following closely the details of the gospel text, Smart paraphrases the encounter of Christ with the Samaritan woman, adding no embellishments or commentary to the narrative. The one possible evidence of his interpretation of the woman's situation is reflected in his word choice concerning her marital situation:

Says Christ, 'Go call thy husband here,
'And with him at this place appear.'
No husband in the world have I -
'I have no husband, is no lie.
'I have no husband, is well said:
'For five thou hadst; but art not wed
'Unto the man you now receive.'
Sir, thou'rt a prophet, I believe.⁵⁷

The rhyming convention Smart was following necessarily would have affected his word choice, but his expression "the man you now receive" indicates his understanding that the Samaritan woman's relationship with the man was a sexual one. Smart follows the biblical account in reporting the woman's testimony to her townspeople and their believing response.

One of the most extensive literary works based on Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman is Edmond Rostand's nineteenth-century biblical drama, *The Samaritan Woman*.⁵⁸ Initially conceived as a drama for Holy Week, the play is made up of three tableaux: "Jacob's Well," "The Gate of Sichem," and "Salvator Mundi."⁵⁹ The first tableau sets the Old Testament scene with the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob prophesying God's selection of the beautiful valley between Mounts Ebal and Gerizim as the site for a great miracle. They are succeeded on the stage by Samaritans who bemoan their spiritual darkness and speculate about the arrival of the Messiah. With the historical background thus established, Jesus and

⁵⁷ Christopher Smart, *The Poetical Works of Christopher Smart*. Vol 2: *Religious Poetry 1763-1771*, edited by Marcus Walsh and Karina Williamson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 290. Edward G. Ainsworth and Charles E. Noyes, *Christopher Smart: A Biographical and Critical Study* (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1943); Sophia B. Blaydes, *Christopher Smart as a Poet of His Time: A Re-Appraisal* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1966).

⁵⁸ Edmond Rostand, *The Woman of Samaria*, in *Plays of Edmond Rostand*, trans. Henderson Daingerfield Norman, vol. 1 (New York: Macmillan, 1921), 141-206.

⁵⁹ Alba della Fazio Amoia, *Edmond Rostand* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978), 53.

his apostles arrive on the scene, but the Samaritans treat them with hostility because they are Jews.

After the crowd disperses, the Samaritan woman, bearing the legendary name Photine,⁶⁰ arrives with her water pot. Singing a suggestive song that Rostand adapted from the biblical *Song of Solomon*, the woman approaches the well oblivious of Jesus' presence there. Rostand confirms the sinful role of the Samaritan woman by having Jesus comment, as he observes her coming:

This woman is a sinner. Carelessly,—
—A vase⁶¹ that knows not the divinity
Her bare arms raised to Heaven yet dimly proves,—
She sings, while dreaming of unworthy loves.⁶²

Photine arrives at the well and goes about drawing her water without noticing Jesus, although he watches her closely. Observing that she uses the water jar as a mirror, he comments to himself, upon her superficiality and self-admiration:

In the cool water, empty smiles she flashes,
Admires the dye upon her seeping lashes,
Looks at her nails whereon a few drops fell,
—And the world's Saviour waits beside the well!⁶³

The description of her primping, experimenting with her smiles, and admiring her make-up reinforces the picture of Photine as a woman absorbed with concern about her physical appearance and beauty—a necessary concern for a prostitute.

Photine is actually leaving the well and walking back toward the city when Jesus calls out asking her for water. True to the Reformation interpretation of her response, she speaks disdainfully to Christ:

I'll not let down my pitcher to my hand.
'Tis on my shoulder. There it will remain.
Ho, Elcazar, lacking gifts and train!
I'm not Rebecca, as you seem to think.

⁶⁰ See Chapter Two for discussion of the Eastern Church's bestowal of sainthood and the special name, Photine, upon the Samaritan woman along with the legendary history of her missionary activity.

⁶¹ In the earlier thoughts of Jesus, Rostand has him compare to slender vases the shapely bodies of women with their arms curved to hold a water pitcher on their shoulders. Rostand, 161.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid, 163.

Be thirsty if you will. You shall not drink.

.....
I'd rather pour it on the sod
Than give . . .⁶⁴

At this point in the play, Jesus begins the dialogue about "living water," and the conversation follows faithfully the sense of the biblical text. Rostand does embellish a bit by having Photine respond to the idea of living water by reflecting upon Elijah's experience of being sustained forty days in the desert without needing water (1 Kgs. 19:8).

When he comes to the portion of the encounter where Jesus speaks of the woman's husband, Rostand once again clearly portrays Photine as sexually promiscuous. As she responds haltingly to Jesus' instruction to call her husband, Jesus says: "I see thou art ashamed," when Photine stammers hesitantly before admitting that she has no husband. Jesus affirms the truth of her answer and says

Five men by that name
Were called, and thou wouldst call this sixth the same.

.....
Thou hast no husband, it is truth you tell.
That holy name thou hast no right to speak.

.....
Five men have had thee. Didst thou seek
God's blessing, or the blessing of God's priest?⁶⁵

Photine then acknowledges Jesus as a prophet and confesses that "I have lived far from God."⁶⁶ She broaches the subject of the expected Messiah, and Jesus reveals himself to her and urges her not to be afraid. As recognition dawns upon Photine, she sinks to her knees and bursts into "the same bold love song that accompanied her first appearance on the scene. She stops short, aware of the sacrilege, but Jesus bids her to feel no shame, for he has received her song—the only words she knows how to sing—as a sweet gift of prayer."⁶⁷

The character of Photine, the Samaritan woman, is further elaborated in the second tableau, which takes place in the marketplace of her city, Sichem. Some of the old women are gossiping about

⁶⁴ Ibid, 164-65. The reference to Eleazar, sent by Abram with gifts for Isaac's prospective bride, Rebecca, ties in with the type-scene motif of the Old Testament episodes where wives were found at wells for Moses, Isaac, and Jacob (see Chapter Two).

⁶⁵ Ibid, 166.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 167.

⁶⁷ Amoia, 54.

Photine and the possibility that she will be driven from the city by the elders on account of her dissolute manner of life.

She waxes every day
More wanton. They will drive her from the city?

.....
All Sichem stinks with that bold harlot's crime.

.....
If God His wrath against us all should hurl,
Photine would be to blame—her ogling eyes!

.....
A shameless hussy! Child of Lucifer!

.....
I'd kill the strumpet if a look could blast!⁶⁸

The words used by these women gossips leave no question about Photine's way of life as Rostand intended it to be perceived. In the eyes of the town, she is a wanton harlot, a shameless hussy, a strumpet.

When Photine arrives to share the news of the Messiah's arrival, the merchants continue about their business and the only response to Photine's appeal is ridicule. Nevertheless, Photine insistently urges her townspeople to go with her to meet the Messiah who "knew all that ever I did! All my sins!"⁶⁹ As the townspeople continue to reject her report, the priest challenges her authority to speak of Christ since piety and learning are required to understand the scriptural prophecies, and certainly "no woman has this learning."⁷⁰

At this point, miraculously, Photine begins to quote various scriptures concerning the Messiah, and the people begin to wonder if she might be speaking truly. However, the priest is certain that if it were Christ at the well, he would not be speaking to Photine:

If she were right,
How could the soul of Christ, give heed, O friends,
Speak to this harlot's soul?⁷¹

He then tells Photine to go on about her clandestine activities: "Go, paint your face and set your evening snares." She responds by humbly acknowledging his "taunt is just. Rightly my sins have robbed me of your trust! . . . I do confess that I was all unclean. I ask forgiveness

⁶⁸ Ibid, 175-76.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 178.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 180.

⁷¹ Ibid, 181.

of you all.”⁷² She culminates this act of contrition by acknowledging that she is

A messenger unworthy of her gift.
But he delighteth humble souls to lift,
Loves the unlovely, quenches bitterest thirst,
—This gracious Lord,—and blesses the accurst,
Pities the helpless, looks upon the least,
Loves the poor man, the child, the bird, the beast—
The small, sad donkey,—wistful dogs we beat,
And publicans . . . and women of the street.⁷³

Here, Photine describes herself as a harlot and identifies with other outcasts of society.

This characterization of her is further confirmed by the disciples at the beginning of the third tableau, which again takes place at the well. The disciples talk among themselves and argue that if Jesus’ purpose was to win the people of Samaria, he could have chosen “some fitter ally and some worthier friend” than “A harlot!”⁷⁴ Peter, especially, is outraged by Jesus’ conversation with the woman:

Sometimes the Master seems to mock, almost,—
The meanest city of the meanest coast
Of the last people, and among these last
To choose a woman, and that one outcast.⁷⁵

Jesus interjects himself into the conversation at this point and begins to teach the disciples about the fields being white for harvest, just as the Samaritan townspeople begin to stream out from the city toward the well. Photine joyfully reports to Jesus her activities in the city and begins to introduce various ones to him. Jesus praises Photine for winning the town for him, but she demurs, recognizing that her only role was as a messenger: “Daughter of folly, made a prophetess, I bore Thy word to these Thou camest to bless.”⁷⁶ Jesus then interacts with a number of the townspeople, but ends the day by promising Photine

Thy image, too, the world will never lose,
Treading the footpath with thy lifted cruise.
When future ages see the Son of Man,

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 193.

⁷⁵ Ibid 194.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 199.

With Magdalene or Samaritan,
 Magdala, Sichem, these two will compete
 To bring its woman closest to My feet;
 So close allied, that this shall be your glory,
 Blonde hair and brown shall mingle in the story.⁷⁷

Thus Rostand concludes by recognizing Photine's significant role as witness. However, by drawing on the tradition that associated her with Mary Magdalene, whose seven demons were believed to have involved her in a life of prostitution before she met Jesus, he equally emphasizes the sinful life from which she was saved.

Rostand's play marks the end of the literary trend of devotional retellings of the Samaritan woman pericope. With Enlightenment influences increasingly undermining the generally accepted authority of the Bible, the literary approaches to biblical narratives have tended to be less pious in recent years than in previous centuries.⁷⁸ Nevertheless, the Bible has been surprisingly influential in twentieth-century literature given the secularism of the times and the loss of reverence for the Bible as a sacred book. Indeed, perhaps because many people no longer accept the Bible's authority for their religious beliefs, writers have felt freer to draw upon its imagery in imaginative ways. They reinterpret its characters and narratives for their own creative purposes, using it as "a purely literary phenomenon."⁷⁹

An interesting late-twentieth century treatment of the Samaritan woman pericope, by Margaret Hebblethwaite, draws the story outline faithfully from the biblical text, but colors it with her own decidedly feminist sensibilities. This work, "The Story of Photina of Samaria," appears in Hebblethwaite's book, *Six New Gospels: New Testament Women Tell Their Stories*, in which she proposes to "look at Jesus through the eyes of women."⁸⁰

Hebblethwaite calls these stories "new gospels" because each story, which is drawn from the biblical gospels, is re-told in fictional form as a first person account by the individual woman involved in the story. In addition to Photina, she retells the stories of Elizabeth,

⁷⁷ Ibid., 205.

⁷⁸ Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 4-9.

⁷⁹ Ryken, 482.

⁸⁰ Margaret Hebblethwaite, *Six New Gospels: New Testament Women Tell Their Stories* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1994), 1. "Photina" is the Latinization of the Greek form, "Photine," the legendary name ascribed to the Samaritan woman. Cf. Chapter Two.

Martha of Bethany, and the three prominent Marys: Mary of Nazareth, Mary of Bethany, and Mary of Magdala.

Hebblethwaite stipulates that she incorporates modern concepts into her reconstruction, and thus, is not claiming to render a strictly historical account. Indeed, it would be impossible to do so “because women have been systematically overlooked in the traditions that have come down to us.”⁸¹

As a further disclaimer, Hebblethwaite acknowledges that her interest is more in what has been left out of the gospels than in what has been left in. She is intentionally addressing feminist questions, “looking for the suppressed role of women.”⁸² She is concerned that these characters from the past should speak with relevance to people of the present, and thus avoids terms that she considers culturally irrelevant, attempting to make “a thoroughly modern translation”⁸³

For those readers concerned with the theological issues of the gospel accounts, Hebblethwaite provides a continuous commentary in footnotes, but her primary text is an imaginative reconstruction. She concedes that the “gospel” accounts given by her women narrators are necessarily quite different from the accounts of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John because as women they are more open about expressing their feelings and experiences. In contrast with the four evangelists, her women “make no attempt to hide themselves away as detached observers, or to paste together a collection of stories handed down to them by others. They speak from the heart as participants in the gospel.”⁸⁴

From the beginning of her account, Hebblethwaite projects the characterization of Photina as a “highly sexed” woman, but she finds that no reason to label her as “morally lax.” In an early footnote, she reports her acceptance of the assumption that the Samaritan woman “must have been more than averagely sexually active,” but argues that she is no less a part of the “female race” and should be represented in “a broad sweep of women, of different ages, personalities and lifestyles.”⁸⁵

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid, 2.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 3.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 55, n. 3.

In her initial self-description, Photina, as Hebblethwaite presents her, claims to be well-dressed, "attractive," having "a slim figure," a "pretty face and good teeth." Being proud of her looks enabled her to feel sexually attractive and to "go into any group of men and emerge with the one I wanted."⁸⁶ Because she always had a lot of men friends, some of the other girls were jealous and accused her of being forward, but she enjoyed breaking out of the expected pattern. She was proud of being a Samaritan and a woman, and felt no need to be humble nor to accept being mistreated.⁸⁷

Finding it regrettable that most people consider her marital history to be the most interesting thing about her, Photina feels it necessary to recount, in summary fashion, the circumstances of her five marriages. These details serve to reinforce the characterization Hebblethwaite gives her, and of particular interest, she records the birth of five children over the course of these marriages.⁸⁸ The biblical account, of course, indicates nothing about any children the Samaritan woman may have had. Another notable item concerning her character occurs in the course of these marriage accounts as she describes the "spiteful and unfair murmurings" among her fellow citizens that she has "the means [a place of her own in the town provided by her family] to run a brothel."⁸⁹

Coming at last to Photina's encounter with Jesus at the well, Hebblethwaite has her describe Jesus' conversation with her as a sort of flirtatious banter. She acknowledges her confusion over his words, recognizing that they are capable of multiple interpretations, but asserts that he *was* enjoying the playful interchange as much as she was. She confesses to responding to him with teasing and taunting until he mentions her husband. Then she becomes sulky when she has to confess that she presently has no husband. His confirmation of her answer convinces her that he has "paranormal" powers, but she is discomfited "to be typecast yet again as the loose woman."⁹⁰

After her sneering suggestion that Jesus is evidently a prophet, Photina's sparring responses begin to give way to fascination. She describes her gradual acceptance of his unique claims about himself and the truth she sensed in his self-revelation. She compares Jesus'

⁸⁶ Ibid, 54.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 54-57.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 57-61.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 59.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 63-67.

revelation of himself to her with God's revelation to Moses at Horeb, based on Jesus' use of the "I am" formula. She also perceives that she is being sent to the people with God's message just as God had sent Moses.⁹¹

Returning to the city, she describes her frustrated attempts to persuade the people to come and meet Jesus. Eventually arousing enough interest among the people to entice them to the well, she describes their journey from incredulity to admiration. Once they encountered Jesus, they also accepted and believed him and wanted to know more. She describes how, having prevailed upon Jesus to stay among them, various ones from the city offered their homes as lodging for Jesus and his companions. Accepting these offers on behalf of his companions, Jesus himself elects to stay at Photina's house because she had first befriended him.⁹²

After the scriptural two days, Jesus did depart for Galilee, but Photina reports that there was more to the story. After all, Jesus made many subsequent journeys from Galilee to Jerusalem and back again, each time staying at her home just as he had on his first visit. She claims to have learned a lot from him at those meetings, including the symbolism of Jesus as the light of the world. He then encouraged her, whose name means "radiant" or "shining," to

raise high your lamp to lead the way for others. Look how Sychar stands out for miles, because it is built on the slopes of Mount Gerizim. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. In the same way, hold your light up high and do not be afraid of what others say of you.⁹³

Photina draws her account to a close by admitting that she "was never going to be a 'respectable' woman," but that she "had lost the taste for second-rate sex." As she learned more about Jesus and his divine mission, her own self-respect grew as she consoled herself with the knowledge that Jesus had not shared his identity as "I am" with anyone else but her. She concludes, "I was the first apostle."⁹⁴

⁹¹ Ibid, 66-69.

⁹² Ibid, 70-73.

⁹³ Ibid, 74.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 74-75.

SUMMARY

As this chapter has shown, the John 4 narrative of Jesus' encounter with a Samaritan woman at the well of Jacob near Sychar has been a factor in English literature since Old English times. From the earliest scriptural paraphrase of the gospel text, through the medieval drama, and down to the late twentieth century "new" gospel account, the characterization of the Samaritan woman has been consistent. Almost without exception, the writers have portrayed her as an immoral woman, likely a prostitute, who was a social outcast from her town and people.

When any attempt has been made to paint the Samaritan woman in a more positive light, it has focused upon her role as a witness to Jesus' identity as the Messiah. Undoubtedly, her testimony about Jesus, which initiated a great missionary work and brought her townspeople to him, was her greatest achievement. But the question remains, as to whether the biblical text as it comes down to us requires that we evaluate her life prior to her encounter with Jesus, as an immoral one. That is the question I will address, and the assumption I will challenge, in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE SAMARITAN WOMAN AS A CONTEMPORARY SCHOLAR HAS UNDERSTOOD HER

Having traced the history of how the Samaritan woman pericope has been interpreted through the ages by the church, in art, and in literature, I now offer an alternative contemporary interpretation. While attempting to be true to the historical features of the text, I have wedded those to what I think are helpful dimensions of the methodologies presented in the introduction—literary, feminist, reader-response, and social scientific. My hope is that the end result will be an example of how modern interpretation can capitalize on the accomplishments of the historical-critical method, yet enrich the experience of scripture and the apprehension of its message by integrating/complementing it with useful aspects of other, more holistic methods.

COMMENTS ON METHODOLOGY

Having acknowledged that my methodology actually combines a variety of contemporary approaches to the biblical text, it is necessary to comment briefly on my understandings of the various methods from which I draw. Most of them cover a broad range of understandings and applications and I wish to clarify both my agreements and my disagreements with the manner in which they are practiced. Each of these methods has whole chapters of books written about them so my remarks here will be understandably brief.

Narrative criticism

Narrative criticism is a method of interpreting biblical narratives using the tools of literary theory. It “approaches the biblical narrative not as a historical source for something that lies behind the text but as a literary text that may be analyzed in literary terms.”¹ These

¹ Robert C. Tannehill, “Narrative Criticism,” in *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, edited by R. J. Coggins and J. L. Houlden (London: SCM Press, 1990), 488.

literary terms include such elements as point of view, characterization, settings, plot, and rhetoric. A further distinctive of narrative criticism is its insistence upon approaching the text as an interactive whole. It has some commonality with reader-response criticism in that it is also concerned with the effect of the text upon the reader as a result of the way literary techniques are used.²

Certain key contrasts exist between narrative criticism and traditional historical criticism. Where historical criticism would interpret gaps and repetitions as evidence of redaction and multiple sources, narrative criticism considers the same gaps and repetitions as literary techniques used by the author to achieve a certain effect upon the reader. How an individual reader fills in the gaps has a direct impact on how that reader understands and interprets the text, a tenet of reader-response criticism.³ Additionally, where historical criticism arrives at an author's view about a certain character or idea by compiling the various references to it throughout the text, narrative criticism emphasizes the developmental aspects in plot and characterization. Narrative criticism holds that a given narrative text has a beginning, middle, and end, and that where a given conversation or event takes place within the entirety of the narrative contributes to its function as part of the narrative.⁴

Regarding the message of a text, historical critics have sought to identify the theology of the gospel writer as a key to the author's intent. By contrast, narrative criticism is not so concerned to identify the text's message as a series of theological statements. While not dismissing the theology of a text as unimportant, narrative criticism is more concerned to understand how the text attempts to

² Mark Allen Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 7-8.

³ Wolfgang Iser, "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach," in *Reader-Response Criticism From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, ed. Jane Tompkins (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 50-69, describes how this individualized process of filling narrative gaps acknowledges "the inexhaustibility of the text" (55); idem, "Indeterminacy and the Reader's Response in Prose Fiction," in *Aspects of Narrative*, ed. J. Hillis Miller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), 1-45; idem, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

⁴ David Rhoads and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 2-3. Cf. Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), for an early application of narrative analysis to John's Gospel, and Black, 265-273, for the application of various rhetorical strategies to John 4:1-42.

influence the reader's attitudes and views. Narrative criticism looks beyond theological propositions to determine how the reader's attitudes, actions, sympathies, and point of view may be reshaped by interaction with the narrative text.⁵

Reader-response criticism

Some reader-response criticism rejects the historical-critical focus on the author of a text and focuses on the reader. Rather than looking behind the text to discover how the present text came to be, reader-response critics take the position that the meaning of a text is created in the process of reading. Reading is viewed as a cooperative endeavor, with the text providing the basic narrative outline and the reader deciphering its words and sentences to arrive at the meaning of the text for that particular reader. Thus meaning is construed "not as a property of the text itself, but rather as a function of the experience of the reader in the act of reading the text."⁶ Meaning is not a given, static and unchanging, but is produced as the reader fills in gaps, infers what is not stated, anticipates and revises expectations, and so forth to arrive at what the text means for her or him. Thus a given text is open to more than one meaning.⁷

Reader-response criticism has come under great disparagement generally on the evangelical front because in many cases its practitioners set aside entirely the historical setting of the text and focus exclusively on the present reader's interaction with it. I, too, reject such un-historical approaches to the text, being persuaded that the text itself imposes restraints that, properly heeded, guard against arbitrary interpretations. Accepting that biblical texts are religious texts reflecting the time in history when they were originally composed, the possibilities for their meanings must be historically, politically, and contextually delimited because

the hermeneutics of a text is conditioned by the text itself. The text indicates the limits (however broad) of its own meaning. A text *says*

⁵ Tannehill, 488-489.

⁶ Robert M. Fowler, "Reader-Response Criticism: Figuring Mark's Reader," in *Mark & Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, edited by Janice Capel Anderson and Stephen D. Moore (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 51.

⁷ Margaret Davies, "Reader-Response Criticism," in *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, edited by R. J. Coggins and J. L. Houlden (London: SCM Press, 1990), 579.

what it permits to be said. Its polysemy arises from its previous *closure*. Hence, the urgency of situating it in proper context, by means of historical-critical methods, and of exploring its capacity for the production of meaning . . .⁸

While readily agreeing that some reader-response efforts have gone beyond the textual restraints, I am equally convinced that readers are actively engaged in the interpretive process, not merely passive recipients. Nor do I believe that acknowledging the part played by readers in producing the meaning of the text undermines or negates the author's original intended meaning.

It seems to me quite possible to give attentive and careful attention both to the authorial meaning of a text and to the reader's response to that text without sacrificing its historical message or its contextual relevance. Indeed I would propose that rather than distancing and alienating themselves from one another, both historically oriented scholars and reader-response adherents seek to work together to achieve an integrated method that reflects the best insights of both approaches to the text. While it is certain that the original author wrote in a historical, culturally conditioned time and place that cannot be dismissed from the text, it is equally certain that no contemporary exegete can perfectly retroject herself or himself into that ancient time and place, even with the most diligent study.

My intention is to read the text according to the convention that Peter Rabinowitz calls the "authorial audience," that is, to accept "the author's invitation to read in a particular, socially constituted way that is shared by the author and his or her expected readers."⁹ By reading in this way, I become the historically conditioned authorial audience. At the same time, I must acknowledge that as the "actual audience," I come to the text "with a complex and often internally inconsistent set of beliefs, expectations, experiences, desires, and needs."¹⁰

Practitioners of contemporary methodologies understand that disinterested interpretation does not exist. They recognize that Leopold

⁸ J. Severino Croatto, *Biblical Hermeneutics: Toward a Theory of Reading as the Production of Meaning*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1987), 80.

⁹ Peter J. Rabinowitz, *Before Reading: Narrative Conventions and the Politics of Interpretation* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1987), 22.

¹⁰ Peter J. Rabinowitz and Michael W. Smith, *Authorizing Readers: Resistance and Respect in the Teaching of Literature* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1998), 4.

Immanuel Rükert's ideal interpreter of the nineteenth century is simply not a realistic possibility. Writing in the preface to his 1831 commentary on Romans, he stated that the interpreter of Paul

is not to think with his own head, not to feel with his own heart, not to view from his own standpoint, but to put himself on the same level as the apostle, know nothing but what he knew, have no idea that he did not have, know no feeling that was unknown to him. . . .

In other words, I require of him freedom from prejudice. The exegete of the New Testament as an exegete . . . has no system, and must not have one, either a dogmatic or an emotional system. In so far as he is an exegete, he is neither orthodox nor heterodox, neither supernaturalist nor rationalist, nor pantheist, nor any other ist there may be. He is neither pious nor godless, neither moral nor immoral, neither sensitive nor insensible.¹¹

I conclude with Moises Silva that this attitude prevails yet today, though few if any would openly acknowledge it. Nevertheless, it has become increasingly recognized that preconceptions are an inescapable part of what any interpreter brings to a text and those preconceptions must be acknowledged and evaluated responsibly.¹² We should recognize that "All the knowledge and experience that we have accumulated is God's gift to us and forms the framework that makes further learning possible."¹³ Therefore, I affirm both the historical realities of the text and acknowledge my own perspectival approach to interpreting it.

Critical feminist hermeneutics

As I was careful to stipulate in the introduction, my approach to this text can only be termed "feminist" in the mildest sort of way. Some feminist interpreters would probably laugh at the mere suggestion of calling my method feminist in any way. As Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza clearly articulates, "biblical readings by women, the reading of the Bible *as a woman*, or its interpretation in terms of gender, are not simply identical with a critical *feminist* reading . . ."¹⁴ Indeed, my method would directly disqualify itself by Schüssler-Fiorenza's criteria because she argues that "feminist biblical inter-

¹¹ Cited by W. G. Kummel, *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of Its Problems* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), 110.

¹² Silva, 207; Rudolf Bultmann, "Is Exegesis without Presuppositions Possible?" *Encounter* 21 (1960): 194.

¹³ Silva, 209.

¹⁴ Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone* (Boston: Beacon, 1995), 154.

pretation must not begin by placing the bible at the center of attention but rather by focusing on 'every wo/man's' struggle to transform patri-kyriarchal structures of dehumanization."¹⁵ By way of comparison and contrast, I *would* place the Bible at the center of my interpretation, not as an end in itself, but as the subject of examination because of what it teaches us about God as his self-revelation.¹⁶

While there is wide diversity among feminist interpreters of the biblical text, the common feature that characterizes their approach is an alternative assessment of biblical texts filtered through the eyes and experience of women interpreters.¹⁷ Both "radical" and "reformist" feminist scholars would agree that they read a text "in light of the oppressive structures of patriarchal society."¹⁸ Deborah Middleton notes that the radical feminist view (which Mary Ann Tolbert prefers to call "the ascendancy view") "tends to reject the Bible and Christianity in favor of an alternative, essentially feminine religious experience."¹⁹ Tolbert defines the aim of this approach as "exposing the androcentric bias or oppressive intention operative

¹⁵ Ibid. Schüssler Fiorenza introduces the spelling *wo/men* "to alert readers not only to the instability and ambiguity but also to the linguistic inclusivity of the category woman/women" and uses the Greek work "kyriarchy" for "the domination of elite propertied men over women and other men" as a distinction from patriarchy which "is generally understood in feminist discourses in terms of the western sex/gender system which posits a man/woman opposition." Ibid, 211, n.6.

¹⁶ Letty M. Russell, "Introduction: Liberating the Word," in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Letty M. Russell (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), 14, affirms that "many women and men struggle to combine a feminist consciousness and serious consideration of the biblical witness with the story of God's presence in the lives of women and men." Cf. Phyllis Trible, "Feminist Hermeneutics and Biblical Studies," *Christian Century* 99 (1982): 116-118.

¹⁷ Janice Capel Anderson, "Reading Tabitha: A Feminist Reception History," in *The New Literary Criticism and the New Testament*, ed. Elizabeth Struthers Malbon and Edgar V. McKnight (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 108-144, provides a brief overview of feminist reader-response criticism, demonstrating the range of feminist approaches to interpreting biblical texts. Cf. Luise Schottroff, Silvia Schroer, and Marie-Theres Wacker, *Feminist Interpretation: The Bible in Women's Perspective*, trans. Martin and Barbara Rumscheidt (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), who give a more extended treatment of the variety of feminist exegetical hermeneutics.

¹⁸ Mary Ann Tolbert, "Defining the Problem: The Bible and Feminist Hermeneutics," in *The Bible and Feminist Hermeneutics*, *Semeia* 28 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983), 119.

¹⁹ Deborah F. Middleton, "Feminist Interpretation," in *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, edited by R. J. Coggins and J. L. Houlden (London: SCM Press, 1990), 232.

within a text, to show the text to be unalterably patriarchal and, therefore, without authority or value."²⁰

The reformist approach, on the other hand, tends to reject most Christian tradition about women, but sees in the Bible the possibility of "reconstructing a positive Christian theology for women."²¹ Tolbert's description of this approach is that it attempts "to highlight the social, religious, and political power of women which has been ignored, overlooked, or hidden by patriarchal hermeneutics."²² Based on these definitions, my interpretation of the Samaritan woman pericope might qualify as a feminist reading, within a broad understanding of the reformist approach. It can definitely qualify as a feminist reading according to Phyllis Trible's approach that allows this classification to the reinterpretation of familiar texts in order to recover ignored aspects.²³

What may, perhaps, predispose some to thus label it is the sympathetic approach that I take to a female character. Perhaps the desire to take such a sympathetic approach reflects my own tendency to filter the text through my eyes and experience as a woman, but I maintain that a male interpreter is also prone to filter the text through his own eyes and experience. With that caveat as a given, it seems inevitable that male and female interpreters might experience and interpret a text in somewhat different ways.

Social-scientific criticism

Social-scientific criticism is based on the understanding that for twentieth century Western readers, reading the New Testament is a cross-cultural experience. Because our urban industrial society and modern cultural assumptions are so different from those of the first century, social-scientific criticism seeks to open a window on the early Christian culture and society to provide modern interpreters of the Bible with an appropriate context for understanding its writings. Without such a context, a late twentieth century reader inevitably imposes his or her contemporary customs, values, and social con-

²⁰ Tolbert, 119.

²¹ Middleton, 232.

²² Tolbert, 119.

²³ Phyllis Trible, "Eve and Miriam: From the Margins to the Center," in *Feminist Approaches to the Bible* (Washington, D.C.: Biblical Archeology Society, 1995), 8. Cf. Emily Cheney, *She Can Read: Feminist Reading Strategies for Biblical Narrative* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996).

ventions on texts written almost two thousand years ago in a far different social milieu.²⁴

As with most of the new interpretive methodologies, there is considerable debate among scholars as to how the social-scientific approach to biblical study should be defined. In fact, it is in some sense erroneous to refer to *the* social scientific approach because in practice there are a number of different ways of applying social methods to biblical interpretation. Dale Martin separates the work of scholars who practice social analysis of the Bible into the categories of “social history” and “social scientific” method. The “social historians” use “traditional historical-critical methods to explore the ‘social world’ of early Christianity;” the “social scientists” apply anthropological or sociological models to “data mined from historical texts.”²⁵ David Rhoads identifies four approaches included within the field of social criticism: social description, social history, the sociology of knowledge, and the use of models from cultural anthropology.²⁶ John Elliott prefers the term “sociological exegesis” to describe his method but points out that a more comprehensive designation would be “literary-historical-sociological-theological analysis” with the understanding that each aspect of the exegesis is interrelated.²⁷

Social-scientific criticism is understood by its practitioners as complementing conventional historical-critical methods thereby yielding “an understanding of what authors said and meant within the contours of their own environment.”²⁸ It enables the interpreter to go beyond the collection of historical facts and social data to envision and understand how the text functioned within the social context in which it was written. It takes into account social realities, belief systems, ideologies, and cultural mores so that the modern scholar can try to sense something of the impact of a text upon

²⁴ David Rhoads, “Social Criticism: Crossing Boundaries,” in *Mark & Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, edited by Janice Capel Anderson and Stephen D. Moore (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 135-136.

²⁵ Dale B. Martin, “Social-Scientific Criticism,” in *To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and Their Application*, Stephen R. Haynes and Steven L. McKenzie, editors (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 107.

²⁶ Rhoads, 136.

²⁷ John H. Elliott, *A Home for The Homeless: A Sociological Exegesis of 1 Peter, Its Situation and Strategy* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 7-8.

²⁸ John H. Elliott, *What is Social-Scientific Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 14.

its original audience. The insights gained from understanding the social context out of which a text arose give the contemporary interpreter tools for unraveling social and cultural scenarios inherent in the ancient text.²⁹

The interpretation of scripture is an awesome and rewarding endeavor: rewarding because it enlarges our understanding of God, but awesome because it is *God* who speaks to us. Bold and daring denizens of an overly-confident post-modern culture, we tend to smile with condescension when we read of the ancient Israelites' fear of having God speak directly to them—they preferred for Moses to be a “go-between” (Exod. 20:19). Yet, when the Scriptures are approached with proper reverence and awe, God speaks just as powerfully through them.

Borrowing from Peter Rabinowitz's terminology, in this chapter I acknowledge myself as the actual audience of the narrative describing Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman, that is, I am the flesh-and-blood person reading the narrative. At the same time I undertake to read as the authorial audience, the audience assumed by the original author of John's Gospel. Every author of necessity makes “assumptions about the readers' beliefs, knowledge, and familiarity with conventions.”³⁰ The more closely these two audiences coincide, the more successful is the writer's communication. Thus, I attempt to read as the author intended by “accepting the author's invitation to read in a particular socially constituted way that is shared by the author and his or her expected readers.”³¹

In claiming for myself the role of authorial audience, I am required to distance myself somewhat from my own needs and interests as the actual audience. Such distancing, however, cannot fully separate me from the distorting presuppositions that are an inevitable part of *my* reading. To read in an impersonal way as the authorial audience is possible only in a limited and special sense, for the authorial audience may have knowledge and beliefs that I do not share. Nevertheless, using all the tools and methods available to me, I must seek to understand and incorporate into my reading the beliefs, commitments, and prejudices of the reader for whom this particular author wrote.³² Such a reading is certainly not the

²⁹ Ibid, 13.

³⁰ Rabinowitz, *Before Reading*, 21.

³¹ Ibid, 22.

³² Ibid, 26.

only way to read an ancient text, but it does seem to reflect the most natural way to read, especially a text whose cultural milieu and social setting are so distant from our own.³³

SCRIPTURAL CONTEXT OF THE SAMARITAN WOMAN PASSAGE

In setting the scene for Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman, it is important to note what precedes this account in John's Gospel. At the very outset of the Gospel, John³⁴ establishes Jesus' identity as belonging to the Godhead from the beginning. Although this prologue is often acknowledged and then put aside to get into the narrative of the Gospel, its presence at the opening of the book establishes its message as essential to the understanding of the rest of the book. Jesus, who was from the beginning with God, has come to earth to make God known to human beings. The remainder of John's Gospel recounts some few of the events and encounters by which Jesus sought to carry out his mission.

Following the opening prologue that establishes Jesus' identity, he is baptized by John, calls his disciples, and performs his first miraculous "sign" at Cana in Galilee, causing his disciples to believe in him. Shortly thereafter, Jesus and his disciples go up to Jerusalem for the Jewish Passover where Jesus clears the moneychangers and merchants from the Temple, demonstrating his zeal for God's abode. John follows the account of the Temple cleansing with a summary statement that many people believed in him because of the miraculous signs he was performing.

Chapter three then opens with the account of Nicodemus, a Pharisee and member of the Jewish ruling council. Nicodemus approaches

³³ For further discussion on the interpretation of texts see I. Howard Marshall, "The Problem of New Testament Exegesis," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 17 (1974):67-73, esp. 72-73.

³⁴ I do not at any point discuss here the issues of authorship, provenance, date and place of composition, historicity, etc. for the Fourth Gospel. Any good commentary or Bible dictionary can provide the necessary discussion of these issues. For the purposes of this interpretation, I accept the pericope as it stands within the Gospel and my interpretation is based upon it as given. For the sake of simplicity, I will refer to the author at times as "John," and by that intend no statement about the identity of the Gospel's author. Cf. R. Alan Culpepper, *John, the Son of Zebedee: The Life of a Legend* (Columbia, S. C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1994), for an extensive treatment of the various discussions and documents regarding the apostle John and his relationship to the New Testament writings traditionally ascribed to him.

Jesus, having recognized God's power in him because of his miraculous deeds, and Jesus responds by talking about attaining spiritual insight by being born in a new way, a spiritual way. Nicodemus, however, bound by his understanding of biological birth processes, is bewildered by the thought of a grown person entering again into the mother's womb. Jesus tries to point Nicodemus to the idea of a spiritual birth by talking about the wind, which has powers that cannot be seen, but are known by the result. Nevertheless, Nicodemus continues to be confused and Jesus chides him that he holds the position of a teacher of Israel, yet he does not understand the basic spiritual truth of how to relate to God.³⁵

At this point Nicodemus disappears from the narrative while Jesus goes on speaking to utter the familiar words of 3:16 and following. I believe that these words of John 3, in addition to the Nicodemus conversation, have enormous import as the backdrop for understanding Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman. Here Jesus points out that he has been sent to save the world, not to condemn it; that condemnation is the result of unbelief; and that as the light of the world, he will draw to him those who live by the truth while those who do evil will hate his light and reject him (3:17-21). The Samaritan woman is one who will be drawn to him.

Chapter three concludes with testimony about Jesus by John the Baptist. In the course of John's discourse, he refers to Jesus as the bridegroom, another image that has significance for understanding the Samaritan woman encounter. John again emphasizes belief in Christ as the source of eternal life by placing these words in the mouth of John the Baptist, along with the affirmation that "God gives the Spirit without limit" (3:34b). John then narrates that Jesus left Judea, heading back to Galilee, when he learned that the Pharisees had heard that he was gaining more followers than John the Bap-

³⁵ A number of commentators have seen the Samaritan woman encounter as a striking contrast to the conversation with Nicodemus: he, the Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews, who seemed unwilling or unable to grasp Jesus' teaching; she, a woman, a Samaritan, (and most would say immoral) though slow to understand, ultimately did receive and respond to Jesus' message. Westcott, 67; Carson, 216; Ben Witherington, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 57; idem, *Women and the Genesis of Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 70; R. E. Brown, "Roles of Women in the Fourth Gospel," *Theological Studies* 36 (1975): 691. Mark Stibbe, *John*, 62, enumerates nine elements of contrast between the accounts of Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman with the result that a woman is portrayed in a more favorable light than the man.

tist. It is this journey back to Galilee that provides the occasion for Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman.

THE SAMARITAN WOMAN: AN ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATION

Jesus' decision to go to Galilee by way of Samaria is expressed by the little Greek word, "*edei*," which means "it was necessary" (4:4). Based on reading Josephus, many commentators explain this necessity as a simple geographical one.³⁶ Without discounting the geographical realities of travel based on John's other uses of *edei* (3:30; 4:20, 24; 9:4), there is strong argument for emphasizing the divine necessity or divine determination that is normally implied by this verb.³⁷

Other circumstances that contribute to the opportunity for Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman offer the possibility of support for the idea of divine appointment in this meeting. For example,

³⁶ Josephus, *Antiquities*, LCL, trans. Louis H. Feldman (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), "It was the custom of the Galileans, at the time of a festival to pass through the Samaritan territory on their way to the Holy City." (xvi.1). Barrett, for example, doubts that John's *edei* conveys any more theological significance than Josephus' did, although he concedes that "he may however intend to suggest also that God willed that Jesus should take this route in order that he might meet the Samaritan woman" (*op cit*, 230, n.4). Carson, 215-216, insists that geography dictated Jesus' itinerary through Samaria, however, he concedes: "This does not mean that the meeting between Jesus and the Samaritan woman was outside the sweep of divine providential appointment (indeed, the 'had to' may refer to God's will for Jesus), but only that Jesus' travel arrangements cannot be marshalled as evidence of divine compulsion." Cf. Hermann N. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, ET 1997), 153, for a similar view.

³⁷ Among those who support the idea of divine necessity are Kysar, *John*, 62; Fred B. Craddock, *John* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 35; Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 255-256; Ben Witherington, in *John's Wisdom: A Commentary on the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 115, divides his support equally between the two possibilities: geographic necessity or divine appointment; J. Ramsey Michaels, *John*, NIBC (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1989), 69, is certain that "The need to go through Samaria was not geographical but theological. There was work to be done. Samaria was a mission field *ripe for harvest* (v. 35), and Jesus' intent was *to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work* (v. 34). Jesus' movements are dictated not by circumstances but by his divine calling." John Rena, "Women in the Gospel of John," *Eglise et Theologie* 17 (1986): 138, n.24, concurs: "Practically speaking, it was not necessary for one to go through Samaria and, at least once, Jesus used the Transjordan detour (Mark 10:1). The impersonal *edei* ('It was necessary') is a useful circumlocution for saying 'God wills.'"

why was Jesus left alone at the well? Nowhere else in John's Gospel, other than at Jesus' arrest in Gethsemane, do the disciples *all* go off and leave Jesus by himself. John reports to the reader that Jesus was tired from the journey. Was he more tired than the disciples? These questions arise from gaps left in the narrative information that is not given. A variety of explanations may come to the reader's mind, but one possibility must be that God has arranged it thus. The same divine direction that prompted Jesus to travel through Samaria could just as easily have arranged the circumstances so that the opportunity is provided for the private conversation that ensues between Jesus and the Samaritan woman.

In assessing the characterization³⁸ of the Samaritan woman, there are essentially three defining moments in her conversation with Jesus. The reader's first impression of the woman comes in her initial response to Jesus' request for a drink. The second leap of apperception comes in the second part of the discourse when Jesus tells her to go get her husband and return. The third revealing moment in the character development of the woman occurs in her witness to the townspeople. How the reader interprets these three defining moments colors what the final impression of the woman will be, and it is important to note that multiple interpretations are possible. The words spoken by the woman and Jesus are a given, but the reader has some freedom for putting tone and inflection into those words and imaging accompanying body language.

A reading of the text with the idea of characterization in mind shows that the revelation of the Samaritan woman's character is accomplished almost exclusively by the method of showing. The narrator makes no definitive statements about her other than concerning her gender and ethnicity: she is "woman" and she is "Samaritan." We infer from the narrator's explanation that she was coming to draw water, that she is not of the upper class because she is drawing the water herself rather than sending a servant for it.³⁹ Beyond

³⁸ Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 105, addresses the legitimacy of treating people described in historical writing as literary characters. I share his view that attempting to understand how a writer has chosen to portray a person does not imply their non-historical existence. Whether real or imaginary, each figure in a narrative must be described by the author selectively; it is not possible to tell everything. Therefore, what the author chooses to include and how that information is used to communicate a convincing "characterization" provides essential information for the interpreter.

³⁹ B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 68.

this scanty information from the narrator, all other development of her character is accomplished either through her words or the response of others to her.⁴⁰

We may draw further conclusions from our understanding of the time marker given by John—it is about the sixth hour. Scholars diverge in their opinions about how to relate the sixth hour to our modern time system. Pliny, the Elder, writing in the first century, describes the variety of ways different people of the era reckoned time:

The Babylonians count the period between two sunrises, the Athenians that between two sunsets, the Umbrians from midday to midday, the common people everywhere from dawn to dark, the Roman priests and the authorities who fixed the official day, and also the Egyptians and Hipparchus, the period from midnight to midnight.⁴¹

In the New Testament writings, the Synoptic Gospels and Acts seem to indicate that a new day was considered to begin in the morning (Matt 28:1, Mk 16:1, Luke 24:1, and Acts 4:3). Each of these narratives gives the sense that the new day began with the morning following the preceding evening. Therefore, when Mark reports that Jesus was crucified at the third hour, the time reference

⁴⁰ It will be evident in the following pages that I treat the Samaritan woman as a historical figure even while employing a literary/reader-response approach to interpretation. I agree with Joel Green, "The Challenge of Hearing the New Testament," in *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation*, ed. Joel B. Green (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 2-3, that such an approach is not inconsistent with a historical perspective for even a historical text is performing an act of communication. The difficulty with understanding a written communication is that the readers (receivers of the message) cannot ask the writer (sender of the message) to confirm their understanding of the message. They cannot ask, "Did we get it right?" Consequently, readers, those to whom the written communication is addressed must often infer meaning. We cannot observe the communicator's gestures and facial expressions; we cannot perceive vocal intonation. Thus, readers must adjudicate meaning out of textual clues, contextual settings, previously acquired knowledge and experience, etc. For this reason, the reader-response phenomenon of "gap-filling," used in a conservative fashion, provides a natural and legitimate interpretive tool for apprehending the writer's message. (I use the idea of *conservative* reader-response vs. *radical* reader-response as the two are differentiated by Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "The Reader in New Testament Interpretation," in *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation*, ed. Joel B. Green (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 307-312. He describes conservative reader-response criticism as that which is *obedient* to the text. It intends that the reader can experience the world view of the text in order to discover and understand the text's ideology. Radical reader-response, on the other hand, privileges the ideology of the reader and uses the text as an opportunity to pursue the reader's own interests and agenda.)

⁴¹ *Natural History*, II, lxxix, 188.

is understood to be 9:00 in the morning. However, we know that Jewish religious time reckoned a new day to begin at sundown, as indicated in Mark 1:32, where the people were free to bring their sick to Jesus because sunset had come, thus ending the Sabbath. Apparently then, the hours of the twenty-four hour day were divided into two twelve-hour periods, with the daylight hours counting from sunrise (around 6:00 a.m.) and the night hours from sunset (around 6:00 p.m.).

If this same Jewish method of reckoning the hours of the day is applied in John's Gospel, which contains more specific references to the "hour" of various occurrences than the Synoptics, the sixth hour at which Jesus encountered the Samaritan woman at the well would be approximately noontime. From sociological information we know that the women did not usually draw water in the heat of the day, more often coming in the evening.⁴² Thus, the reader may conjecture that some unusual circumstance has brought the woman to the well at a different time, but at this point, the reader has no information by which to explain what that circumstance might be.

Several commentators draw upon their assumption of the woman's immorality (derived from John 4:18) and suggest that she comes at this unnatural hour to draw her water because, being an immoral person, she wished to avoid the stares and remarks of the other women. Ben Witherington's comment is typical: "When Jesus tells the woman to go and call her man, her response is deliberately evasive — 'I do not have a man (husband).' She does not wish to reveal her true moral condition; apparently it was a sore point for her, as her presence at the well at noon likely implies—she wished to avoid inquiring eyes and lips."⁴³ However, Josephus indicates that it was noon when Moses encountered the daughters of Raguel (Reuel/Jethro) at the well in Midian (Exod. 2:15ff.),⁴⁴ and Jacob's meeting with Rachel at the well near Haran took place during midday (Gen. 29:7), so noontime encounters at the local well were not unheard of, nor even considered to reflect on the character of the persons coming at that time in other biblical settings.

⁴² Gen 24:11; Brown I, 169; Bultmann, 178.

⁴³ *Wisdom*, 120. Cf. Carson, 217; but contrast Kysar: "That the woman comes at this hour to avoid others because of her notoriety as a sinner seems speculative and makes more of the inference of the woman's immorality than John does!" (63).

⁴⁴ *Antiquities*, II, 257ff. Cf. Morris, 258, who acknowledges Josephus' time indication, yet still concludes, "... the woman had a bad reputation, and ... she chose the time and the place to avoid other women."

It is also possible that the time was not noon. In contrast to the Jewish time reckoning, which counted the hours from sunset and sunrise, certain scholars have suggested that in John's Gospel, the modern or Roman system, which counts the hours from midnight and noon, should be used for determining the time.⁴⁵ According to this numbering, the woman would have come to the well near 6:00 in the evening, the "sixth hour" being counted from noontime. This method of calculation would make the woman's arrival conform to the time considered to be more usual and would confute the argument that she came at an unusual time because, as an immoral and outcast person, she wished to avoid intermingling with the other women.

The argument for calculating the hours according to the Roman system in John's Gospel, rather than according to the Jewish system used in the Synoptics and Acts, is based primarily upon the conviction that the Roman system fits better the several chronological references in John's Gospel found in 1:39 "the tenth hour," 4:6 "the sixth hour," 4:52 "the seventh hour," and 19:14 "the sixth hour." Culpepper summarizes the rationale:

All of these work as well or better following the modern or Roman system, counting from midnight and noon The two disciples stayed with Jesus "that day" from ten in the morning rather than from four in the afternoon (1:39). The Samaritan woman came to the well in the evening, when Jesus was tired from a day's walking (4:6), rather than in the heat of the day. The fever left the official's son at seven in the evening and he started home the next day (4:52), and the crucifixion began at six in the morning rather than at noon.⁴⁶

Even though Culpepper's summary essentially echoes Westcott's more detailed argument, Westcott admits that "this mode of reckoning hours was unusual in ancient times."⁴⁷ Nevertheless, he offers some evidence that the Roman system was used in Asia Minor and suggests that "St John, in using what is the modern reckoning, followed a practice of the province in which he was living and for which he was writing."⁴⁸

While Culpepper, Westcott, et al, make a compelling argument, the circumstance remains that we cannot be certain of the time of

⁴⁵ Norman Walker, "The Reckoning of Hours in the Fourth Gospel," *Novum Testamentum* 4 (1960):69-73; Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), 12-13; Westcott, 282; Culpepper, 219.

⁴⁶ Culpepper, 219.

⁴⁷ Westcott, 282.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

day when this meeting at the well takes place. The reader must fill a gap in the narrative here, based certainly on the known historical data, but as evidenced in the preceding discussion, *certainly* as to the time is not possible. And even if the reader clings to the Jewish manner of time reckoning and decides that the encounter is at noon, any attempt to explain the significance of that time requires imposing presuppositions upon the narrative. The hour, alone, does not provide evidence about the character of the Samaritan woman.

Regardless of the hour at which this encounter occurs, Jesus initiates the conversation with the woman, and her response to his request begins the intrigue for the reader in deciphering who she is (4:7-9). The narrator does not tell us that the woman is surprised or shocked by Jesus' request, but her words leave no doubt about her incredulity. Jesus has disrupted her world of expectation on two counts; he has violated both racial and gender taboos.

First, and most obviously, she is Samaritan and he is Jew. We know from historical sources about the hatred between Jews and Samaritans. The origins of the schism between Jews and Samaritans are debated, but it apparently had both political and religious dimensions at times.⁴⁹ At the time of Jesus, the animosity was predominantly religious, the Samaritans claiming common religious origins with the Jews but worshipping on Mt. Gerizim rather than in Jerusalem, and being considered ritually unclean by the Jews.⁵⁰ Whether one understands *ou sygchrontai* as meaning Jews have no dealings with Samaritans or use nothing in common with Samaritans,⁵¹ the re-

⁴⁹ Cf. John Bowman, *The Samaritan Problem: Studies in the Relationships of Samaritanism, Judaism, and Early Christianity*, trans. Alfred M. Johnson, Jr. (Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1975); John Macdonald and A. J. B. Higgins, "The Beginnings of Christianity According to the Samaritans," *New Testament Studies* 18 (1971), 54-80.

⁵⁰ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (I-XII), The Anchor Bible (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1966), p. 170. Cf. John Bligh, "Jesus in Samaria," *Heythrop Journal* 3 (1962), 334-35, regarding a Rabbinic regulation of A.D. 65 or 66 stating from the perspective of purity laws that "the daughters of the Samaritans are menstruants from the cradle." Therefore, since one could never know whether a Samaritan woman was in a state of ritual uncleanness, the only safe practice was to refrain at all times from using any vessel touched by a Samaritan woman. Also, Robert J. Karris, *Jesus and the Marginalized in John's Gospel* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990), 69: "Since the Samaritans did not observe all the regulations which the Jews did, there was always the suspicion that they, and especially their women of menstruation age, would be unclean. And this uncleanness would be transmitted to the vessel the woman was carrying, especially if she had drunk from it."

⁵¹ David Daube, "Jesus and the Samaritan Woman: The Meaning of *sygchraomai*,"

sult is the same in terms of the woman's astonishment and wonder that Jesus speaks to her at all.

The second issue contributing to the woman's shock is that Jesus, a man, initiates speaking to her, a woman. Jesus was violating a Jewish cultural taboo in that Jewish men were admonished to spend no time in conversation with a woman, especially not in public.⁵² Thus, the woman had double cause for her astonishment; Jesus was crossing the boundary between Jew and Samaritan and between woman and man.

The tone that the reader projects onto the woman's response to Jesus' request for a drink will color significantly the reader's idea of the woman's character. Does she reply in an insulting, jeering manner, as if to throw in Jesus' face the fact that the Jews considered Samaritans irreligious, but would still ask a drink from one?⁵³ That is certainly one possibility for understanding her attitude, but not the only one. I read here only shock and incredulity. No doubt the woman had noticed Jesus sitting at the well as she approached. Possibly she had already perceived that he was a Jew, perhaps by his manner of dress. She had no expectation that he would even acknowledge her presence, much less speak to her. It is plausible to think that her response was not defensive⁵⁴ or mocking, but simply surprised. One reason for not attributing to her a hostile response

JBL 69 (1950) 137-47, argues for the interpretation that Jews and Samaritans do not use utensils in common. T. E. Pollard, "Jesus and the Samaritan Woman," *Expository Times* 92 (1981): 148 credits Augustine with a similar interpretation and concludes that Augustine himself either invented this interpretation or drew on a familiar traditional interpretation. D. R. Hall, "The Meaning of *sygchraomai* in John 4:9," *Expository Times* 83 (1971): 56, argues that it was not the ritual prohibition of sharing a drinking vessel that was at issue, but Jesus' indifference to the barrier of hatred and suspicion between Jew and Samaritan.

⁵² In the M. Ab. (1.5), Rabbi Jose b. Johanen of Jerusalem is quoted as saying: "... talk not much with womankind. They said this of a man's own wife: how much more of his fellow's wife." Furthermore, rules of propriety forbade a man to be alone with a woman or even to give her a greeting. M. b. Kidd. (81a, 70a-b). Cf. Charles Talbert, *Reading John* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 112; Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 360.

⁵³ This is Calvin's interpretation. John Calvin, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 1-10. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1959) 90. This view is shared by Hendrikus Boers, *Neither on This Mountain Nor in Jerusalem* SBL Monograph Series (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 161.

⁵⁴ Wilhelm H. Wuellner and Robert C. Leslie, *The Surprising Gospel: Intriguing Psychological Insights from the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 40, "The initial dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman is an almost classic description of how a defensive person responds to a simple request."

is the very cultural circumstance that caused her to be shocked by Jesus' request. As a woman, a person of extremely little value or respect in the cultural milieu of first-century Palestine,⁵⁵ she would not have had the audacity to make a saucy reply. Given that women were scarcely ever spoken to by men, it seems unlikely that when one was, she would respond in any unseemly way.

Another indication of the woman's sincerity is that in her next two responses, she addresses Jesus as *kurios*, which is probably used in the common sense of "sir," rather than "Lord" (4:11, 15). It is a respectful form of address, one that would not be compatible with a disdainful attitude and tone. Consequently, though some commentators prefer to find her words concerning Jesus' relationship to Jacob (who had dug and used the well) scornful,⁵⁶ I do not. Here we have one of those narrative occurrences where our inability to evaluate the intent of discourse by observing gestures and facial expression or hearing vocal intonation requires that we as readers infer meaning.⁵⁷ An inference of respect can as readily, if not more readily, be deduced from the text as its opposite. Similarly, I do not find her eventual request for the living water a mocking challenge, but a genuine desire to have this superior water Jesus is offering. I hear a tone of puzzlement and wonder, perhaps even of slight challenge for Jesus to make good on his claim, but not one of mockery.⁵⁸

The woman's continuing insistence on keeping the conversation at a literal level may reflect some degree of intellectual dullness, but it is difficult to assess.⁵⁹ Her life was very earth-bound, concerned

⁵⁵ *The Mishnah*, trans. Herbert Danby (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), Sot. (3:4); *The Talmud of Babylonia: An American Translation*, trans. Jacob Neusner (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 199), b. B. B. (141a) and b. Nidd. (48b). Cf. Shailer Mathews, *A History of New Testament Times in Palestine, 175 B.C. - 70 A.D.* (New York: Macmillan, 1914), 161-62, "... women among the Jews ... were not as carefully educated as men, and were uniformly treated as an inferior sex." Cf. Jeremias, 359-76.

⁵⁶ Bernard, 242; Calvin, 92.

⁵⁷ Cf. n. 41 for discussion of this limitation in written communication.

⁵⁸ John often has persons ask questions of Jesus that challenge his claims, but their questions generally do not reflect mockery even when asked by those who openly opposed him. Compare the questions of the Jews who asked Jesus for a sign to prove his authority to drive the moneychangers from the temple (2:18), Nicodemus' question about a second birth (3:4), and the Jews' perplexed inquiries over Jesus' claims to a special relationship with his father (8:12-30), all of which are posed as challenges to prove his claims rather than as taunting mockeries.

⁵⁹ Nicodemus is not described as lacking in intelligence because he was unable to understand Jesus' words about spiritual birth.

with daily survival, and the conceptual level on which Jesus was conversing with her would likely have been an unaccustomed event. Perhaps she simply could not make the mental jump in the immediate time frame. After all, she was trying to deal with her amazement that the conversation was even taking place, while trying to maintain some semblance of engagement with the ongoing discussion. It seems obvious that her cultural and educational circumstances did not provide her opportunity for the type of conversation in which she was engaged. She may have been doing well just to maintain a thread of connectedness on the literal level.

With Jesus' next words to the woman, the narrative enters the second defining moment for her characterization. Realizing the need to take a different approach in order to break through her dogged literalism, Jesus abruptly re-directs the conversation. He tells the woman to go, call her husband and come back (4:16). The woman, however, responds by telling him that she has no husband. Jesus acknowledges the truthfulness of her answer and then reveals his supernatural knowledge of her life story. Indeed, she does not have a husband at present, but she has over the course of her life been married to five husbands, and is now living with a man to whom she is not married (4:17-18).

This revelation by Jesus of the woman's past has been the crux for traditional exegesis in establishing the kind of person this woman was. Hearing Jesus reveal her unusual marital history and her present apparently immoral living arrangement, most commentators conclude that the woman is promiscuous, perhaps even a prostitute. This response seems logical on the surface because to have had five marriages immediately elicits a judgmental reaction, at least from most contemporary readers. Such a marital history seems to imply that the person has little sense of commitment and has abandoned relationships readily. Such a person defies our Christian idea of marriage as a covenant relationship. Add to five marriages, the fact that the woman was now living with a man without the benefit of marriage and the reader's opinion of her, if based on superficial impressions, is dramatically changed in a negative direction. Judgment of her immorality tends to be immediate without any consideration that an explanation might be found that does not condemn her.

A few scholars have argued that the Greek syntax of Jesus' response to the woman in 4:17-18 supports the characterization of her

lifestyle as immoral. Daniel Wallace contends that Jesus' alteration of the word order in v. 18 ("a husband you do not have," vs. her words ("I do not have a husband")) has "great rhetorical power."

... for by placing *ἄνδρα* first the emphasis is on what the woman does not have ("A husband I don't have"). It is as if Jesus had said, "Lady, you are quite correct: you've got *somebody* at home, but he's not your husband!"⁶⁰

Frederic Godet has suggested that the placement of the possessive pronoun, "your," in v. 18, preceding rather than following the noun it modifies, "husband," makes the pronoun emphatic, so that the phrase should be read, "the one whom you now have is not *your* husband, but the husband of another."⁶¹

These grammatical/syntactical observations are worthy of consideration. Robertson is clear that word order is one way of providing emphasis in a Greek sentence, particularly when a word is removed from its usual position and put in an unusual one.⁶² He also affirms that emphasis alone does not explain every unusual order of words in a Greek sentence, and that "the interpretation is sometimes left to the reader's insight."⁶³ Blass-Debrunner-Funk point out that "Any emphasis on an element in the sentence causes that element to be moved forward."⁶⁴

In his detailed and thorough analysis of John's grammar and syntax, Edwin Abbott points out that repeating the same thing, or having one character repeat the same thing just uttered by another, in slightly dissimilar words and/or with changes in word order is characteristic of the Johannine writings.⁶⁵ Becoming even more specific,

⁶⁰ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 455. Cf. Westcott: "... the transposition of the words in the repetition of it, by which the emphasis is thrown in the original on *husband* which lay before on *I have not*, at once reveals how the thoughts of the woman were laid bare" (71).

⁶¹ Godet, 426. This position is also suggested by Charles Giblin as cited in a letter from R. Alan Culpepper to the author dated December 3, 1999. Cf. D. Moody Smith, *John* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 115, "... when Jesus says, literally, 'Well do you say that you have no man, for you have had five men and the one you now have is not your man,' emphasis naturally falls on the 'your'."

⁶² A.T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1931), 417.

⁶³ Ibid., 419-420.

⁶⁴ F. Blass, A. Debrunner, and Robert W. Funk, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 248.

⁶⁵ Edwin A. Abbott, *Johannine Grammar* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1906), 401.

he notes John's "tendency to place the *last* word or clause of a saying *first*, when the saying is repeated."⁶⁶ Among the examples that he cites are John 1:26-33, where John the Baptist is reported saying, "*I baptize in water . . . in water baptizing*" (followed by "*baptize in water*"); John 4:17-18, the text in discussion, where the woman says, "*I have not a husband*," and Jesus echoes her statement, "Well did you say, '*A husband I have not*'"; and in the same chapter, vv. 31, 49, "'Our fathers—the *manna they ate in the wilderness*' . . . 'your fathers—they *ate in the wilderness the manna*'."⁶⁷ Abbott concludes, on the basis of his study, that "wherever a word is placed out of its usual order, or out of the order in which it has previously occurred, then—unless a change is made for clearness—some difference of emphasis may be expected. He specifically affirms his own impression that in John 4:18, Jesus' reversal of word order concerning the woman's lack of a husband, emphasis is "the main cause of the change."⁶⁸

As for the placement of the possessive pronoun, Robertson offers the generalization that "the Greek language has freedom in the construction of the pronouns," while asserting that sometimes the second person possessive pronoun, even in its enclitic (unaccented) form, "has a very emphatic position."⁶⁹ Blass-Debrunner-Funk observe that unemphatic pronouns tend to follow the verb, but also note that unemphatic pronouns are "placed as near the beginning of the sentence as possible."⁷⁰ Turner offers the conclusion that "with anarthrous nouns it is immaterial whether the gen. pronoun precedes or follows the noun."⁷¹

These grammatical authorities substantiate the possibility, perhaps even the probability, that Jesus is emphasizing that the man with whom this woman is associated is not *her husband*. If these grammatical points are to be thus interpreted, it seems only fair to emphasize both the pronoun and the noun—the man is not *her's* (to the exclusion of others), nor is he, with her, in the relationship of husband.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 407.

⁶⁷ Ibid. Abbott lists a number of other similar instances that illustrate the same Johannine tendency.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 408-409.

⁶⁹ Robertson, 678.

⁷⁰ Blass, Debrunner, Funk, 248-249.

⁷¹ Nigel Turner, *Syntax*, vol. III, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, by James Hope Moulton (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1963), 189.

Nevertheless, I suggest that even here, at the point in the characterization of the woman where she is most vulnerable to judgment and condemnation, that there is another possible interpretation. Based on our knowledge of the social and cultural values of first-century Palestine, why would it be unnatural to surmise that the woman is deserving of our sympathy rather than our opprobrium? Is it not possible that the woman had been married so many times because of economic and social reasons, rather than for lustful ones? By what means, in her culture, could she survive by working for wages? In a society that granted to women essentially no social or legal standing apart from a responsible man—father, husband, brother or son⁷²—she can legitimately be considered a marginalized figure, subject to economic, social and legal exploitation.

Linda McKinnish Bridges, in a brief article on this text suggests that the woman can be viewed “as a victim of ancient, oppressive patriarchy.”⁷³ Along similar lines, Gail O’Day points out that women’s rights were severely limited in first-century Palestinian culture.⁷⁴ A woman had very little control over her own life, with both marriage and divorce being the prerogative of men.⁷⁵ Her status in community life was more akin to that of slaves and children than to a responsible adult. According to Judith Wegner, the Mishnah was forthright and inconsistent in its treatment of women. On the one hand, it recognized her biological and economic functions to have intrinsic value for society. On the other hand,

women do not play a central role in mishnaic culture; they occupy a marginal position that is restricted to the domain of private transac-

⁷² Carolyn Osiek, *What Are They Saying About the Social Setting of the New Testament?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 75; cf. John J. Collins, “Marriage, Divorce, and Family in Second Temple Judaism,” in Leo G. Perdue, Joseph Blenkinsopp, John J. Collins, and Carol Meyers, *Families in Ancient Israel* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 143-147; Carolyn Osiek and David L. Balch, *Families in the New Testament World: Households and House Churches* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 145.

⁷³ Linda McKinnish Bridges, “John 4:5-42,” *Interpretation* 48 (April 1994) 174.

⁷⁴ Gail R. O’Day, “John,” in *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 296: “The popular portrait of the woman in John 4 as a woman of dubious morals, guilty of aberrant sexual behavior, derives from a misreading of John 4:16-18. . . . There are many possible reasons for the woman’s marital history, and one should be leery of the dominant explanation of moral laxity. Perhaps the woman, like Tamar in Genesis 38, is trapped in the custom of levirate marriage and the last male in the family line has refused to marry her.”

⁷⁵ Collins, 108, 119-121.

tions. When it comes to public affairs . . . the sages expressly or implicitly bar women from active participation.⁷⁶

On the assumption that the cultural/sociological value system was essentially the same in Samaria, it is clearly evident that this woman, as all women of her day, was considered to be of limited importance. The biblical text tells us nothing about any children she might have had, but even if she did have sons, their responsibility for her would have been to try and arrange another marriage when a previous one ended in death or divorce.

It is important to note here that we do not know whether the woman's five husbands had died or had divorced her, but divorce was exclusively the husband's right.⁷⁷ For this reason, I suggest that the woman may well have either outlived her husbands, or at least some of them, or been divorced by them for perhaps no particular fault of her own such as the inability to bear children. Since Jewish thought allowed a maximum of three marriages for a woman, the fact that she had been married five times indicates that her life had been especially difficult, and probably meant that she was an object of either pity or ridicule, perhaps both.⁷⁸ Certainly in a culture oriented toward honor and shame values, honor was not attributed to her.⁷⁹ The fact that she is now living with a man who is not her husband may not be a matter of her choice, but a matter of necessity in order to have the protection of a man and a place to live. If, having had five marriages, she is advanced in age and without means

⁷⁶ Judith Romney Wegner, *Chattel or Person? The Status of Women in the Mishnah* (New York: Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 5-6.

⁷⁷ A woman could initiate a divorce under certain extreme conditions: "if a husband refused to consummate the marriage, was impotent, had an unpleasant occupation, had leprosy, was unable to provide support, or if he was to be separated from her for a long time, then she could sue for divorce in the courts." Ben Witherington III, *Women and The Genesis of Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 5-6. Cf. M. Ket. vii.10; Collins, 119-121.

⁷⁸ Perhaps the reason the woman comes to the well at noon rather than at the traditional evening hour is, as some have suggested, to avoid contact with the other women because they shun or revile her. On the other hand, maybe it is their pity that she seeks to avoid. Her life story is, no doubt known in a small community, and we have already shown that it is one of unusual hardship. Perhaps the other women are silent because her misfortune makes them uncomfortable and they search in vain for words of comfort to offer her. Perhaps their happy chatter about children and husbands is too painful a reminder for her of what is lacking in her own life. There are a number of possibilities that allow for an understanding of the woman in a kinder way than traditional exegesis has acknowledged.

⁷⁹ Bruce J. Malina, *Windows on the World of Jesus* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 1; Osick, 25.

to support herself, having a man to provide for her may have been her only means of survival in a cultural system that made no provision for the independent maintenance of a woman alone. Perhaps the man with whom she is living was unwilling, or unable financially, to marry her, but was willing to extend to her the protection of his household. Perhaps he was even a relative in the kinsman-redeemer tradition so notable in the Old Testament book of Ruth. Obviously this interpretation cannot be proved, but neither can the traditional one that labels her a harlot. That the authorial audience would likely have at least considered these alternatives seems to be evidenced by the positive treatment of her in the earliest commentary by Origen and in the earliest artistic depictions at Dura Europos and in the catacombs. Linda Bridges considers the woman to have an immoral relationship, but her words of challenge to traditional interpretation offer a relevant commentary:

That she needed redemption needs no debate, for she is presently living with a man who is not her husband. The interpretation that she was an unclean harlot, the prototype of sexual sin and prone to evil and promiscuity, however, needs a fresh, uncritical examination, loosed from male biases.⁸⁰

Based on this understanding of the woman's situation, I buttress my initial impression that this woman was not mocking or taunting in her earlier replies to Jesus. She was a woman hard hit by the oppression of life in first-century Palestine, and she was a realist. She knew, after five husbands and the suffering that must have accompanied those broken relationships, that endurance was all she had. She lived a life of daily hardship, grateful for food and shelter. Small wonder that she was unable to transition to Jesus' spiritualized conversational approach. Life for her was very literal, dependent upon the basics of physical water, food and shelter.

Perhaps it would be helpful to consider why the woman's marital history is the aspect of her life that Jesus uses to signify his knowledge of her. Traditional exegesis has often understood it as his confrontation of her sinfulness. Suppose instead, Jesus makes this reference because it most truly represents her life situation as the victim of a system that depersonalized her. What if it is Jesus' strategy not only for revealing his supernatural knowledge, but also for expressing his compassion and concern for the suffering she has

⁸⁰ Bridges, 174.

endured and the hardships she has experienced? A woman five times rejected through divorce or abandoned through death has experienced one of human life's most poignant sufferings many times. If we consider this possibility, a whole new light is shed on this entire encounter.

I find support for this interpretation in the fact that the woman makes no effort to defend or excuse her present living arrangement. It is a fact of life; it is the best she is able to do in her "hard-knock" reality. *God* certainly understands. This trust in *God's* mercy contributes to her awakening realization of who *Jesus* is. His revelation that he knows her life and all that she has endured without being told, without condemning her, and even perhaps expressed with compassion, suggests to her that this man is *God-like*, and so she calls him a prophet. Possibly then, since he obviously possesses divine knowledge, he can answer the long-standing question about where is the proper place to worship *God* (4:19-20).

While many interpreters find in her question about the place of worship an attempt to deflect the conversation away from her own sinful life, again I propose an alternative view. There is evidence to suggest that she was genuinely concerned to be in proper relationship with *God*. After all, *Jesus* had expressed confidence early in his conversation with her that if she had known his identity, she would have asked him for his living water. This was a woman who lived every day in intimate contact with her need. Her trust in *God* and his ultimate justice and mercy may well have been the secret of her ability to endure the existence that was hers.

How much the woman understood of *Jesus's* description of true worship is debatable, but it apparently sounds very *God-like* to her. This man had more to offer in terms of compassion, understanding and wisdom than any prophet she had ever heard about. And so, tentatively, she brings up the matter of the Messiah (4:25). Although the Samaritan expectation of a Messiah, a *Taheb*, was limited to the Pentateuch's promise of a prophet like *Moses* (Deut. 18:15),⁸¹ the anticipation was that he would have the answers for all their religious questions. She may not have understood the full import of *Jesus's* words, but she perceived him to be a unique being. Her testimony about expecting the Messiah could be her way of testing *Jesus* in comparison to that expectation. How will he relate himself to the

⁸¹ Beasley-Murray, 62.

expected Messiah? Jesus knows who she is at once; she must discover who he is, and gradually awareness is dawning.

Contrary to those who suppose that she is dismissing Jesus' answer as inadequate and conceding that they must await the Messiah to get the true response to her question, she is beginning to recognize within her own mind that Jesus is more than a man, more even than a prophet. Might he be the Messiah? After waiting hundreds of years for the prophet like Moses, fulfillment was too incredible to think. She dare not ask the question forthrightly. It is too much to consider, too overwhelming to contemplate, and yet . . . could he be? And so she simply acknowledges her expectation to see how he will respond. In the simplest and most direct manner possible, Jesus affirms that he, the very one she is talking with so unexpectedly, is this long-awaited Messiah.

We can scarcely imagine the confusion of thoughts that must have been going through the woman's mind. The Messiah, the long expected prophet, is here—has been conversing with her. Can it possibly be true? The literal, everyday part of her is saying this experience cannot be happening. Perhaps, this whole encounter is a dream. Another part of her, quickened by God's spirit, is trembling with excitement and joy and vindication. How can she know? How can she be sure? It is too overwhelming for one person to comprehend. The arrival of the disciples provides a needed interruption, for she needs time to absorb and assimilate that which is happening to her. She needs help in evaluating this experience, and so she leaves her water pot and returns to the town to enlist other opinions.

Much has been made of the woman's leaving her water pot at the well (4:28). I think she is experiencing the same thing Jesus describes to his disciples regarding his lack of need for physical food (4:32). He has food they know not of—spiritual food that satisfies so completely that physical hunger is forgotten. The woman has found living water, a spring welling up in her to relieve the tedium and hardship of her daily existence. Physical water is secondary at this moment. All that matters is the possibility, the very real possibility, that God has performed one of his surprising and amazing acts in history. He has sent the long-awaited prophet like Moses who will revive and renew the people.

The response of the townspeople to the woman's testimony is another indication that she is not an immoral, promiscuous woman.

She has no trouble getting the people to hear her, to consider her question seriously, and to respond by accompanying her back to the well to investigate and assess Jesus for themselves (4:29-30, 39). Had she been a loose woman with a reputation of sinfulness, I question whether she would have gotten the same response. People would more likely have jeered and mocked her, incredulous that such a person would claim to have a positive encounter with a man of God. They more likely would have laughed and ridiculed her for her testimony. Not so, this woman of John's gospel. The people respond readily and with no resistance. The reader almost gets the opposite impression—the people are eager to believe her.

The woman is sometimes portrayed as a model of discipleship because she becomes a faithful witness and other people believe in Jesus as a result of her testimony.⁸² I have no quarrel with this understanding, but I also suggest that in spite of the traditional readiness to associate her with an immoral lifestyle such a judgment is not required by the text. This woman could have been a faithful child of God, within the limits of her ability and understanding, even before her encounter with Jesus.⁸³ Perhaps she was a God-fearer, not in the sense of the technical term used of Gentiles in the synagogue, but as one who acknowledged God and sought him for her daily sustenance. John has told us in 2:24-25 that Jesus "knew all people . . . knew what was in people." Thus it is possible to suppose that Jesus knew she was devout in her faith in spite of a life of extreme hardship and difficulty, in spite of her lowly estate within her culture. It is even possible to wonder if Jesus' need to go through Samaria was in order that he might encounter this very woman, who trusted in a gracious God regardless of what seemed a graceless life.⁸⁴

⁸² Schneiders, "Women," 40, points out the similarity between the words used by the evangelist in John 4:39, where many of the Samaritans believed in Jesus because of the woman's testimony, and the words of Jesus in John 17:20 when he prays not just for his disciples but for all those who will believe in him through their testimony. Stibbe, *John*, 67, credits her "development from disciple to disciple-maker," and Barrett, 243, affirms that bearing witness "is the task of a disciple. The woman joins with John the Baptist as witness, and in fact precedes the disciples."

⁸³ Phillips, 307, asks if this woman could be "the matriarch of that other, displaced religious tradition that worships what it doesn't know or see on the mountain (vv.21-22):"

⁸⁴ When the disciples return and urge Jesus to eat, he informs them that "my food is to do the will of him who sent me" (1:31). His encounter with the Samaritan woman must then be identified with God's will. Cf. Boers, 189; Carson, 228.

After all, it was with just such lowly, but faithful souls that Jesus found his best response,⁸⁵ and the Samaritan woman did not disappoint him.

This reading, then, attempts to view the Samaritan woman in light of her first century social world. It is consistent with the early Church's commendation of her for her example as a faithful convert and an apostolic witness. However, this reading emphasizes the possibility of the woman's religious devotion, and her good character as well. Worshiping a God she did not fully understand (4:22), she could still have been sincere and humble in her belief. She was no less needful of Jesus' living water to restore her to proper relationship with God, but this reading delivers her from the stigma of being labeled as promiscuous, immoral, or a prostitute. It enables us to see her as a pious believer whose faithfulness God rewarded by sending her a unique revelation. Just as promised in John's Prologue, God sent her spiritual light so that she might become an enlightened child of God through her belief in Jesus Christ.

⁸⁵ Mary's words in her song of praise describe her as one of "lowly estate" (Luke 1:48). The woman who touched Jesus' garment and was healed because of her faith, as well as the Syro-Phoenician woman, are other examples of women of lowly, marginalized status whose faithfulness led to meaningful encounter with Jesus. In John's Gospel, the man born blind whom Jesus healed in Chapter 9 was a marginalized man whose response to Jesus required faith and resulted in a significant testimony.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

Jesus and the Samaritan woman. A memorable encounter for any reader of John's Gospel. But, what is it that makes it memorable? Several things, perhaps. That it took place in Samaria, a land avoided and detested by Jews. That the Samaritan woman had been the wife of five husbands, an unusual circumstance in first-century Middle Eastern society. That she was living with a man who was not her husband, a situation that on the surface evokes an immediate judgment of immorality. That many Samaritans came to know the Lord, an event that signaled the extension of the gospel beyond the limits of the Jewish people. For most readers, however, the most memorable moment of the many in that encounter is likely Jesus' revelation of himself as the source of "living water" and his confident assertion that God is not concerned with the place where worship takes place, but with the spirit in which that worship is offered. Indeed, those revelatory words of Jesus provide the focus for the Church's interpretation and proclamation of this biblical text.

The survey that this study has made of how the encounter of Jesus and the Samaritan woman has been interpreted in ecclesiastical commentary, in art, and in English literature has shown the response to be essentially consistent. For the Church, the Samaritan woman's value has been largely confined to her role as a witness to her people. For the early church, that role was significant enough to commend her for emulation, and representations of her encounter with Jesus regularly appeared in the primary settings of religious import—baptisteries and cemeteries. Following Christianity's establishment as the primary religion of Constantine's empire, when a new era of church building began, Christ's encounter with the Samaritan woman was a popular scene in mosaics, carvings, frescoes, and other liturgical representations by which the Church instructed believers. For the Eastern Church, she was even worthy of sainthood and had a day set aside in the church calendar for her remembrance.

During the Patristic Period and the Middle Ages when the Samaritan woman was so highly regarded in the Church, her acclaim

was always connected to her witnessing role. Chapter Two has shown how, with the change in theological current brought on by the Protestant Reformation, the perception of the Samaritan woman underwent radical transformation. While her association with a profligate lifestyle may have been understood at an earlier time, it is with the Protestant reformers that her supposed immorality became her dominant attribute. In the Reformers' zeal to correct abuses in the Church's penitential system, they came to emphasize the issue of individual sins and the need for personal repentance and regeneration. In that atmosphere, the Samaritan woman's acclamation as a witness to her people was displaced by an emphasis on her sinfulness, which Jesus alone was able to overcome and to restore her to right relationship with God. The Samaritan woman was no longer a figure to be emulated by believers so much as an example of depraved human nature, hostile to the grace of God, but unable to resist when God's election becomes operative. The terms used to describe the Samaritan woman changed from "witness," "apostle," and "missionary," to "harlot," "immoral," and "promiscuous." Thus, her image was transformed.

In more modern times, particularly toward the end of the twentieth century, as ideological and literary critical methods of Bible study gained prominence, the impression of the Samaritan woman once again experienced some transformation. While the Reformers' judgment of her as immoral and hostile has largely persisted among practitioners of the historical-critical interpretive methods, many literary and feminist interpreters have returned to the early church's perspective and chosen to emphasize the woman's role as a witness, thus presenting her in a more positive light. Even with these latest revisions to the evaluation of the Samaritan woman, however, she continues to be regarded as having a sexually immoral lifestyle that is brought to light by Jesus' revelation that she has had five husbands and is living with a man who is not her husband. Thus she has fared in the ecclesiastical interpretations.

The artistic representations of the Samaritan woman have, for the most part, stayed with the early church's perception of her. By its nature an artistic work that attempts to portray a narrative event must compress into a static moment as many elements of the story as possible so that the picture will call to the viewer's mind the entire episode. Perhaps because of that limitation, the artistic interpretation of the Samaritan woman has tended to be more consistent

through the centuries in presenting her in a positive image. With few exceptions, the artists who have portrayed the Samaritan woman have depicted her as young and attractive, but with attitude, gestures, and attire suggesting her approbation by the Church rather than her promiscuity. Perhaps by presenting her as young and attractive the artists acknowledge her sexually improper lifestyle, but emphasize the more important factor of her testimony by depicting her in respectful and respectable relationship to Jesus. Certainly in the late twentieth-century paintings from third world countries, the emphasis is on Jesus' compassion in reaching beyond ethnic and class and gender barriers to include all people in his offer of "living water".

The literary works that have drawn from Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman also tend to be consistent with the ecclesiastical interpretations. The earliest literary works are often simple paraphrases of the biblical story, frequently in allegorical meditations or dramatic renditions. These early literary works presented the Samaritan woman's story in much the same way as the Church did—emphasizing the woman's role as a witness for instructional purposes. However, as early as the time of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* at the close of the fourteenth century, the allusions to the Samaritan woman clearly indicate that she was considered to be engaged in an immoral lifestyle. Edmund Rostand's nineteenth-century play unambiguously presents the Samaritan woman's lifestyle as sexually promiscuous before her meeting with Jesus, although he does conclude by recognizing her role as a witness. Margaret Hebblethwaite's modern story not only acknowledges the woman's sexually liberal lifestyle, but almost boasts about it. This embellishing and retelling of the story with modern conventions tries to "redeem" the Samaritan woman from the negative characterization of her, but does so outside the constraints of the biblical text.

My own interpretation of the text as presented in Chapter Five could perhaps also be classified as an attempt to rehabilitate the Samaritan woman from negative characterizations. Until I made the attempt to read this biblical text as a literary text from the perspective of the authorial audience and without preconceptions about its interpretation, I too, understood the Samaritan woman as living a sexually immoral lifestyle. When I did confront the text searching for its meaning without the influence of prior interpretations, one of the first questions that presented itself to me was what were the possible ways of explaining Jesus' comment about the woman's

marital history? That question has been the impetus for this entire study.

The writer of John's Gospel has not clearly indicated for us how that statement is to be understood. He records the dialogue and leaves a gap to be filled by the reader. How that question is answered then impacts the reader's perspective on how the whole pericope is interpreted. Was the woman offended and hostile to Jesus' initial request or only shocked and surprised? Was she mocking when she asked how he could deliver "living water" when he had nothing to draw with or was she expressing simple incredulity? Was she taunting when she asked if Jesus could be greater than Jacob who gave them the well or was she beginning to intuit his true identity? Did she attempt to divert the conversation from her embarrassing personal life by asking the question about the proper place of worship or was she expressing a genuine desire for proper relationship with God? Each of these questions is answered differently depending upon how the reader fills the narrative gaps. My purpose in this study has been to suggest that we can fill those gaps differently than they have traditionally been filled, and as the authorial audience might have filled them, without sacrificing the integrity of the text.

Claiming no more than the text as we have received it, but drawing upon what we have learned from historical-critical background studies, social-scientific analyses of Middle Eastern culture of the time, techniques for understanding literary texts, and most of all, from what the Bible in its totality teaches about the character of God, we can see the Samaritan woman through a new lens. It allows us to see the Samaritan woman not as an immoral and sexually irresponsible person, but as a pious believer whose suffering Jesus acknowledged and whose faith he rewarded with the revelation of his own identity as the divine emissary for whom she and her people waited.

Engaging in this type of interpretive exercise does not negate the traditional interpretation nor does it establish the validity of this one. It simply affirms that biblical texts, like other literary texts, are capable of multiple messages depending upon what the reader brings to the text for filling the inevitable gaps. There is no surrender of the text, no degradation of the text, no embellishment of the text. There is simply the inspired text as received canon, the reader with her or his experience and training, and God's Spirit to reveal God afresh as we are open to receive that revelation.

Perhaps it is useful to consider why traditional exegesis has labeled this woman as immoral, probably a prostitute. The obvious reason is because of Jesus' revelation that she has had five husbands and is living with a man out of wedlock. Yet, are we perhaps guilty of the same obtuseness, the same preoccupation with material and objective reality that characterized the woman's conversation with Jesus? Because of her focus on the physical realities of the world around her, she was blind to the spiritual reality that Jesus wanted to reveal to her. It was only by his careful and continuing interaction with her that she was gradually led beyond the limited scope of her everyday, physical world to see the far superior spiritual world in which Jesus would have her take part.

Is it not possible that our own tendency to become enmeshed in the everyday routine of life with its physical and material concerns has limited our vision of what God may be trying to reveal to us? Is it not possible that our emphasis on the historical-critical approach to scripture and our insistence upon establishing the objectively verifiable elements in it has caused us to miss many of the greater spiritual truths it would teach us?

Certainly to read the Samaritan woman pericope as I have done here cannot be authoritatively confirmed as the only responsible reading by the derivation of any objective proofs from the text. I maintain that neither can this approach be rejected by objective proofs from the text. And I have attempted to demonstrate how the text supports my reading as a viable interpretation of the authorial audience.

In the great scheme of things what difference does it make whether Jesus revealed himself to a profligate Samaritan woman or a pious one? If all we are looking for in scripture is theological postulate or historical verity, perhaps none. If we also wish to find in scripture the greater spiritual meaning, perhaps it is useful to entertain both options as possibilities. Certainly for all whose lives have been shadowed by public kinds of sins, there is comfort and reassurance to know that a compassionate Savior does not condemn, but seeks to redeem. At the same time, particularly in our age of burgeoning pluralism, there is hope for those whose spirits seek the true God to know that God, too, seeks them and desires to be known by them. Perhaps the great spiritual truth of this pericope is the seeking God, who, whatever a person's background and experience, is gracious to reveal himself to those whose spirit longs for the renewal of God's Spirit.

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